
NOTES OF A TRIP THROUGH ACEH, DECEMBER 2007

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Three friends decided to take a trip through Aceh. Aceh, pillaged by the Indonesian army for twenty-nine years, the site of a conflict between that army and the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (Free Aceh Movement), the GAM, the victim of the terrible tsunami, was now peaceful. We had nothing in mind and no one particular to see. We simply wanted to enjoy the beauty of the west coast, in particular, and to meet whomever we might come across. We took a route from Medan via car to the west coast of Aceh. We went from one coastal town to the next as far as Banda Aceh, the capital, at the northern tip of Sumatra, and then down the east coast and back to Medan. In all, this took not much more than three weeks, but covered about 1,700 kilometers, sometimes over crumbling roads and, across the mountains, around spectacular curves so many in number and so acute that it seemed we were going in smaller and smaller circles.

The narrator of these notes refers to himself as “I.” He could call himself “we.” “We,” however, would imply a process of deliberation, consultation, decision, and agreement among the persons encompassed by the pronoun. Indeed, consultation did take place, but later, after the draft was written. If “we” were used, the spontaneous nature of the impressions “I” give here would be lost. I—JTS—believe that the source of these impressions should be singular, for in the course of this trip not only did the three of us do the same thing, by and large, and see the same things, but there was, I (JTS) am convinced, the sort of contagion of thoughts that occurs when three strangers to a place travel through it together. Which observations, which reflections belong to

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whom is not possible to say. We were not one person, we saw differently, but what we saw and heard impressed us in an almost literal sense. That sense of being impressed cannot be rendered with the word “we.” (At points in this narrative, the complications of this innovation require us to abandon it. We do so only to resume afterwards.) What is recorded here is the state of those impressions as they were at the end of each day or early the next morning. That balance was then subjected to review, augmented and diminished, and even corrected. Even before we had left the neighboring province, Sumatra Utara, when we were out of the ambiance of the big city, the foreignness of the first town we visited, Sidi Kalang, struck us. And with that “we” became “I,” and “I” began taking notes.



A mural in Meulaboh painted by school children. The gate at the edge of the water is inscribed “Weel Come to Tsunami Area”

Sidi Kalang, Sumatra Utara, December 18, 2007

Five hours from Medan through the mountains. A glimpse of Lake Toba across a spectacular stretch of mountainous landscape.

Sidi Kalang itself is made up of a main street plus two parallel streets with a few connections between them. The main road continues to Aceh. One leaves the city and sees that there is more of it off to one side. Sidi Kalang is famous for its coffee. The

main road is lined by businesses, of which perhaps a majority are Chinese. There is also a coffee house, with colored chairs facing the street, noisy from the motorbikes, of which there are many. This is next to a park with a Batak house, very large, its yard decorated with a painted stone giraffe and other animals. At 5:00 in the afternoon, the park was deserted except for three or four children. But the coffee shop is busy. Families—Batak or Minang—come on motorbikes with small children. At one table are three men in their forties wearing leather jackets to protect them from the wind when they ride their motorbikes. They look ferocious as they lounge back and smoke. But when one talks with them, the defiance inherent in their dress and demeanor melts into the usual Indonesian friendliness. Women clothed in “*busana* Muslim” dress—headscarves, inexpensive sarongs, as in the ads—serve the coffee. This coffee shop is also an adolescent hang out. The girls, who come in pairs for the most part, display a certain Muslim chic, often with tight jeans and elaborate hairdos, often enough tucked under head scarves.

In a shop selling various sorts of food—eggs, cookies, etc.—nothing, the owner told us, over Rp1000 (90 cents US). The owner is a Chinese, born in Sidi Kalang. He first went to work in Padang Sidempuan—“where the streets are very broad, and it is very clean”—in a tobacco factory. There he met his wife, a Batak. They married and came here. Now their daughter, with three children, married to a Chinese, lives with them and works in the store. He would not tell us what his son-in-law did.

He invited us to the back rooms. The ceilings are two stories high, and the first room is piled with crates of eggs, sacks of various sorts, and shelves full of goods. Behind it is another room, a kitchen, it seems, and quite large. A steep staircase leads upstairs to the sleeping rooms, which must be located over the store itself. One does not say “bedrooms” because here the division of functions characteristic of the bourgeois house is not fully apparent. The proprietor’s daughter and wife pass back and forth from the kitchen to the store, and the children go in and out as we sit around his desk and talk in the storeroom-office-sitting room.

Salesmen come from Medan bringing various goods. He buys them without tasting them because it is not his taste that counts, he tells us, and, if any of these items do well, he orders more. He does not use credit. He is afraid, he said, of being overextended. Until a few years ago, he had to go to Medan for his goods; now salesmen search him out. It marks a different form of capitalism. Instead of participating in a network of credit relations among Chinese, one buys from anyone, Chinese or not, without having to establish oneself by knowing the creditor. The result is an expansion of the market, up till this stage. But he is at a limit. His business can’t grow bigger because he does not have a possibility of attracting many more customers. He already has the most complete store of this type in the town.

The town itself is commercial, an entrepot for the countryside. Thus the shopkeeper also buys coffee—Arabica—and sells it in Medan. This is a provincial town, but when I look at the youth, I become less sure what “provincial” means here. It is not only that they wear the same styles as the kids in the city. It is also that they feel free to leave. This was not the case in his shopkeeper’s generation, our fifty-year-old Chinese host told us.

His family itself is the result of a certain break with the old ways. First, his is an interethnic marriage, and between a Chinese and a Batak, at that. It was not arranged. They did it themselves. He calls his daughter and her children "Batak." But he has an altar with incense, and there is no cross nor any sign of another religion in his establishment. His wife visits her family once a year. It was understood that he does not go with her.

He is one of the few Indonesians whom I felt was lonely. But if so, it is not for lack of other Chinese. Besides, he said, it is not hard to be here. One gets along with one's neighbors. But it is not good to see them too much. Once a week or so is fine. Otherwise one quarrels.

The street in the evening: shops with bright neon lights. But not bright enough to penetrate far into the street. There is a feeling of make-do, given the architecture typical of small trading towns the length of the archipelago, but with the added sense one has in Sumatra of being on a frontier. Two-story wood structures, the shop on the bottom with a rolling metal facade, the upstairs inscrutable. The effect is not so much an atmosphere of defensiveness—the Chinese man said he was not afraid of trouble. If people gave him trouble, he would do the same to them, he said, which might well be a sign that he has pals among the youths. He is not frightened, but he has only fragile connections in a place where everyone knows everyone, where the wealth of connections and the ease of making them are not at issue. But in this town the warmth of his family—and the women are warm and open, and he is sympathetic and welcoming—is not enough, though he certainly would not say so and would even be surprised to learn it. But he is here forever. He is too old, and without the money necessary to go elsewhere, he said, and he does not want to. He does not feel shut in or particularly provincial, but that is his case. Also, he told us, anywhere one can make a living is fine.

His story is told without reference to historical events—no Japanese, nor the Dutch, nor independence, nor the massacres and anti-Chinese events of 1965, figure in what he tells us. Nothing happened here, in his account. And it is this absence of events, the absence of connection to a historical reality, the presence of familial ties which are everything, that gives his family life its tonality. Contrasting with nothing but the lives of others that are just like his regardless of religion or ethnicity, his family is not felt as a refuge from the world.

He supports his family. He got the business from an older relative. He keeps it going, but it is not a heritage. He does not maintain this family business as though he were established in the town. He simply lives a life without making reference to conflict of any type except that potentially included in his relation to his neighbors. He does all right, and he does not know what he is missing. But he is missing something. He welcomes foreigners. He tells us his stories. And when we are ready to leave, he says it is evening, the stories are not finished. Tomorrow will be too late, he must work, and we will not come back. But if we do, we must stop in. He will not be able to visit us where we live.

December 19, 2007

It is Idhul Adha. This is probably a Muslim minority town—but many residents are Minangs, it seems, plus soldiers from the detachment of Polisi Militer (Military Police) who are from various areas. Families dressed in “Muslim” are going to the mosque. There are two mosques, an old one, now mostly abandoned and without apparent access, as road development took other turns, and the new Mesdjid Agung, which appears to be dominant but lacks a dominating position, though it is located on a rise near the *bupati*’s (regency head’s) office. Next to this mosque is an Islamic university, with a *facultas tarbiyah* (faculty of Islamic education).

At 6:30 this morning, on the main street, in the *kedai kopi Horas* (Greetings coffee shop), five men, speaking Pakpak² and watching an American film about WWI—which they said was about the Nazis—are drinking coffee. All middle-aged. On the walls, posters of soccer teams and above them, a small reproduction of an imaginary Sisingamangaraja.³

The languages of this place are local. In the house of the Chinese shopkeeper described above, the kids speak Teochew.⁴ But father and daughter spoke Batak to each other. Indonesian is a second language here. Interethnic, it is still a lingua franca. Everyone stays with the identity he is born with, and this identity is ethnic. This is a place where life is led outside the framework of the nation, in the sort of relationship that characterized colonial times. Mixture takes place, but it smells of scandal. It is Furnivall’s plural society.⁵ Except that Furnivall never saw it from the bottom. Everyone knows everyone. But the coffee shop indicates that the mix does not go far. One maintains good relations with neighbors by limiting intercourse with them. There is thus avoidance, rather than formality, but an avoidance that does not indicate hostility. One is not greeted on the main street or the side streets. I say *selamat pagi* (good morning). Some answer, some don’t. The coastal Malay towns of the last century must have been like this. Describing what he called “plural society,” Furnivall famously said that, in such a place, people meet only in the market. He might have emphasized that such a meeting is also a social relation of a sort. It yields a society, a place where people share expectations of each other, rather than a community, where each feels a bond to the other that excludes those who do not belong.

The place is littered with saddle-shaped Batak roofs made into emblems. There’s one on the church serving as an eave over the doorway, for instance, and the same motif is in use on our hotel. The government buildings are often built in that style. The park, in which a large Batak building is set, commemorates the day of the transfer of sovereignty according to a plaque that says the park was “*diresmikan*,” officially recognized, sometime during the New Order.

But there is, nonetheless, no competition among religions, judging from the buildings. The Mesdjid Agung though large, is scarcely visible, and the church is large,

² A language of North Central Sumatra.

³ The leader of a Batak rebellion against the Dutch in the area of Tapanuli, North Sumatra.

⁴ Teochew is a language used in eastern Guangdong, China, and by some overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia.

⁵ See John S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policies and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1948).

but not well kept up. The highest structures by far are three transmission towers that serve cell phones. However one cannot say that they “dominate” the landscape since they have no relation to other structures. Their placement seems to depend only on technical efficiency. Everyone seems to have a cell phone—all ages, etc. Thus, there are two computer schools, one of them the Stephen Cambridge School, teaching “komputer,” “keybord,” etc. And there is the Universiti Terbuka, the Open University, in a shack that is, indeed, *terbuka* (open).

Singkel, December 20, 2007

It is not possible to get to Singkel (spelled “Singkil” on some maps) by accident. At least by road. There are stories well known in the nineteenth century of ships stranded or wrecked on this coast, their crews in trouble. Those who pass by night on Acehese roads today are sometimes victims of bandits armed with guns left over from “the *konflik*” (conflict), as it is called. Possibly the English term is used because Indonesian has no word for a rebellion stimulated by the three decades of pillage, rape, theft, and murder committed by the Indonesian army. The revolution took place between different peoples; the “conflict” among those of the same nation. No one calls it a civil war, since this would mean there was a clear difference between opposing sides that are defined as having started out, at least, in the same polity, and therefore as having the same civil status. Here, in the view of Acehese, the real question doesn’t have to do with comparative civil status, or, potentially, with a relationship between two nations, Indonesia and Aceh; the real question concerns a group that, though it calls itself “Acehese,” is not sure what the word refers to. Is “Acehese” an ethnicity, a language group, people living in the same territory? From this, it follows that, though Hasan Mohammed Tiro, the founder and head of GAM, has written about taking part in an Indonesian democracy, he has also spoken of Aceh as being legitimately independent because the sultanate never surrendered. The final leaders of the resistance to the Dutch were religious scholars. Hasan Mohammed Tiro is the descendent of the last of these, and it is the source of his claim to leadership. The vast popular support for the GAM, however, does not seem to have assimilated the argument about legitimacy. Most people simply wanted relief from the exactions of the Indonesian army.⁶ And what does one call the reaction when those pledged to protect attack their protégées?

In any case, now the main road from Sidi Kalang to Tapak Tuan is safe. It passes Singkel by. One has to detour for an hour or more to get to this port. Once there, one finds there is a market that scarcely resembles a market, with tin-roofed wooden houses and space for goods in front of them. Chinese in style. Only one or two shops have signs. One has to walk up to them to see what is for sale. Clearly, this is a place

⁶ Thus Elizabeth Drexler, in her book on the conflict, quotes a young Acehese involved in the peace process saying that Acehese “... society ... is like a person floating in the river when it is flooded ... Automatically he is going to look for something to grab onto ... The people of Aceh know that GAM is just like grass, something that they cannot actually hold onto.” Elizabeth Drexler, *Aceh, Indonesia* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), p. 215. See also the last chapter of James T. Siegel, *The Rope of God* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000) for a discussion of the unclear nature of “Acehese” identity.

where everyone knows where to go already, and where there are only needs to be satisfied and no new desires to be raised.

Singkel is a place where Indonesian is a third language. The owner of the hotel who told me he is "Acehnese" later said to Ismael, our Acehnese driver, when Ismael addressed him in Acehnese, that he was "*jaméei*" and knew only a few words of Acehnese. "*Jaméei*" is an Acehnese word for "guest," and in the phrase "guest language" refers to the mixture of Minang and other languages used here as a *lingua franca*. When it does not work, people have recourse to Indonesian.

The man who appeared one afternoon and identified himself as the owner of this hotel where we were the only guests is from the new *bupati*'s office. In fact, we learned later, he is not the owner, but the owner's younger brother. The hotel is, he said later, a "family" business. Another case where "we" and "I" are confused. He was born in 1972. He says there never was much trouble in Singkel. Not with the GAM and not in 1965. I asked him if he had heard stories of the revolution. He had not. The only stories he heard were about Abdul Rauf di Singkel and Hamsa Fansuri, but he did not know when they lived nor anything else about them except that Abdul Rauf was buried in Singkel according to Minang who make pilgrimages here to visit the grave during the fasting month; but that, according to Acehnese, he is buried in Banda Aceh.

I asked him when the strange wooden row houses were built. He said they were old, that they were from the 1960s! Here is another man cut off from political history and history altogether; one who, hearing the word "stories," only knows two names. Nothing else happened here except for their presence. Even then, there is no story attached to the names. Nothing ever occurred here, or, indeed, any place else, ever, if one follows his account.

The hotel, eight rooms only, built two years ago, having always at least one guest, is located on the new avenue where the government offices are built to house the recent *kecamatan* bureaucracy. There is also a big bank, but not much else. All this in New-Order style, marked by an attempt to impress that otherwise is lacking in the town. The workers in the hotel are two young homosexuals who were later joined by a third, a Javanese with a red streak down his hair.

Today is Idhul Adha, the celebration of the sacrifice of Ibrahim. All the eating places were closed. Finally we found someone who cooked packaged noodles for us. In the market, however, we met a Minang woman who promised to make dinner for us later. She lives as "*penumpang*," a person given a place by an owner, in the house of her "*abang*," her older brother, probably a classificatory term. The picture of this *abang* was on the wall. It is a painting (*lukisan*), she said, though it is clearly a photograph. But it looks to her that way, it seems, because the man is dressed in a white coat with a high white collar. Surely photographed not later than the 1920s. He must be from the family of the *abang* relative to whom she is *penumpang*.

They lived in their own place not far from here until one night the GAM came. Or men claiming to be GAM who were robbers (*perampok*). They shot a relative who resisted them. No one would help the wounded man, no doubt out of fear. He fled, and he died. She clearly feels guilt for being unable to come to his aid. She told this as part of the story of the tsunami. The earthquake occurred in the night—about 11:00. She and her family fled to the mosque with others. They gathered there, and then they

fled to higher ground. They went by car, bicycle, anything. And they stayed with relatives or in a "hotel" until they were sure the water would not be a threat. It seems that there is always a place to go. Always somewhere, someone, who will receive one. At least for these people, residing in a place where the tsunami itself was not serious, only the earthquake.

The word "tsunami" in Singkel does not refer to the gigantic waves but to the powerful earthquake, since the floods were not severe here. This woman's house, for instance, was fissured only and then repaired. Here also, the time between the earthquake and the flood was extended by comparison to those places. There was not a total disaster, as there first seemed to be in Meulaboh or Banda Aceh and elsewhere

In this woman's account, there is a sense of a frightening, even terrible, calamity, perhaps impressed in her thoughts once people here learned what happened elsewhere in Aceh—physical horrors that, nonetheless, did not happen here. There is, maybe for this reason, no trauma in the strict sense. She recalls the story on demand. She tells it. She becomes grave as she does so. But she is in control of her memories, not the other way around. On the other hand, the story of her relative killed by the GAM comes to mind when she thinks of the tsunami. As though, thinking of calamity, she could not help thinking of him. The gliding of one story into the next, from the story of what happened to her to the story of what happened to him, from the story of the tsunami to a story of the conflict, blunts any sense of the sublime, at least in its Kantian interpretation. It is not that she almost escaped death and lived to tell about it. It is that he was killed and she could not help him. There was a sudden invasion, but the point is not that she almost lost her life but that the world of relationship she counts on was inoperative.

When we ask her what happened to her at the time of the tsunami, she knows what we want to know and she responds to it, giving us what goes under the term "tsunami" for her. She tells us about "calamity." The calamity she experienced was not destruction, which by comparison to other places, in any case, was less here but still great, but the inability of herself to be social. She does not tell the story as though now she is safe, before she was in danger, either from the tsunami or the marauders. She says instead that sociality failed. She does not blame the killers. The failure was her own; her inability to respond to the damage they caused. This suspension of the social, centered in herself, better expresses the danger that goes under the term "tsunami" than the story of the tsunami itself.

She does not find herself recomposed after telling us of danger she escaped. There was no escape in her story. Not only was her relative murdered, but she found herself unable to respond. She gets no benefit from the story as she would if it were a matter of the sublime. One might call this condition traumatic, a repetition of the event rather than a retelling. But it could equally well be the restoration of the social, her capacity to respond even to strangers from the other side of the globe, a condition distinct from the moment of the failure of that ability.

At the same time, with her narrative taking the form it does, she should be telling a political story in which who she is in relation to the killers would be marked. But it is not that either. It should be about the GAM and its evil or about the TNI (Tentara Nasional Indonesia, Indonesian armed forces) and its evil or about those who pose as

one or the other and kill and rob. But the story is left without resolution. Both sides were bad so far as she is concerned. She is, indeed, "*jaméi*," a guest here. She has only uneasy relations with both sides. As a consequence, there is no "history," no collective memory. Her past remains only a matter of her guilt and not of their fault. The "they" is unclear, and the center of the story is not, in any case, what "they" did but what she could not do. In the end, the distant but correct relations with everyone around her, no matter who they are ethnically or politically, is preserved.

We rented a wooden boat, really a large canoe with a small motor, and went upstream, beginning in the marsh, which is intersected by channels, choked in places with a type of water lily, which we were able to penetrate. For some of the distance, the channel traces the back borders of houses. There are often small decks of unpainted wood, which serve as outhouses and as places to wash clothes; young children play there. As we chugged past one alcove off the canal, we saw a boat with a dozen young boys, six to eight years of age, each of them naked and astonished to see us. Indeed, in this area there are bands of children that age. They have a "boss" and are known to be *nakal* or mischievous.

As one goes up river, one passes first the oldest part of Singkel, the part that backs or fronts onto the river. Once again, unpainted, weathered wooden houses, with no particular relation to the river. The river is, of course, functional. It is a place to bathe, to wash clothes, to use as a toilet, and, above all, to use as a route of travel. There are boats like ours, smaller canoes with their gunnels barely above the water line, sometimes paddled by old women, and a few larger fishing boats. The river is obviously a point of orientation, but it is not contemplated. Nowhere is there a house that incorporates it into a view. People at work there, in other boats, washing clothes or otherwise doing something, notice as we go by. One feels it is a look that notes, that keeps track of what goes by, but that does not recognize any aesthetic significance.

On the other hand, for us the river is dense with aesthetic impressions. One soon passes the town and travels for half an hour before reaching a village. In this space, the only human presence is another boat. There is no exchange of greetings, though the river is not wide. It is not a place for mutual recognition. It does not matter that there is another presence. It simply isn't felt, but, to me at least, the presence seemed assimilated to the currents of the brown water, which in places are fast and twists into whirlpools. It is as though the motion of the river is gathered up in the motion of an approaching boat going down river.

The vegetation is thick and blots out everything human. There are stretches of towering sago palms, their wide brown trunks thrusting up and changing into erect palm fronds. In between them, the water penetrates in fingers into another sort of density which to us is only darkness. Other places are marsh with other sorts of vegetation, all of it thick. The foliage hangs over the river. The air is dense as well. The green of the leaves blends into the brown of the river. It is an enclosed world in which the gray sky is more a weighty cover than an atmosphere. It bears down until its thickness, the fight of the plants for space, the push of the water into and out of the bankless edges of the river, seem not like life but a tendency towards its extinction.

Gampong Jawa

The area with a new boulevard lined with new government offices is in a place settled by Javanese. These were transmigrant workers on the Socfin palm-oil-tree plantations, who, when their six-year contracts expired, came here and cleared the land, thus establishing a claim to it, and farmed it. A man in his seventies told us that he could have extended his contract multiple times, but then, at the end, he would have nothing. This way, he has his house, his little place where he sells coffee and snacks, and his daughters near him. When he came, there were tigers and other savage animals. They looked at him, and he told them to leave and they did. No one was ever hurt by them.

Islam

One hears about the *syariat* (Islamic law) police, but they are not in evidence. One sees lots of young women—older ones too—without the *jilbab* (Muslim headscarf). Each cluster of villages has its own *syariat* police contingent. They issue warnings. It takes three of these warnings before the accused is then sent to the *syariat* court. But this has never happened here. Or so we were told.

Fishermen have a *panglima laut* (leader, unofficial “sea captain”) whose function seems to be religious. They are forbidden to fish on the sea—but not the river—on Fridays. If they do, their catch is confiscated and brought to the mosque. This is a controversial subject.

Ismael, our driver, Acehnese, said everything goes well here, but you have to be careful, for if there is a quarrel people become violent. And, indeed, there are a fair number of disputes judging from what we heard. There were two today, both concerning the tomb of Tgk. Abdul Rauf di Singkel. The tomb is on the edge of the river. The markers of the head and feet of the deceased are about fifteen feet apart. Either Abdul Rauf was that tall, or his grave extended itself after his burial, and no one thinks it is strange. Pilgrims come to pray there. In the fasting month, there can be fifty vehicles from Padang. Today there were a couple, one a truck containing mainly women and children. I entered the mausoleum and looked around and took a picture. As I exited, a man grabbed me and demanded my camera. I gave it to him. He demanded I show him who I was with, and then in a coarse way repeatedly scolded Arief. He, Arief, (Indonesian) should know better. This is not a place for tourists. Arief said he was Javanese and in Java everyone was welcome and everyone could take pictures. The man said he was Javanese, too. We did not argue; we only apologized, but he made a scene. We apologized again and left. Or tried to, until the man stopped us and scolded us again before allowing us to leave.

This event was quickly known at the other end of town. When it came back to us, we learned that the *penjaga* (guardian) of the Mosque is a *silat* (a kind of martial art) champion, born here, who lived in a *pesantren* (religious school) in Sumatra Barat. When he returned here he established a form of Islam that is said to be heretical. For instance, he said at one time that the Friday prayer was not necessary. He has about fifty followers.

It is Friday. Next to the tomb is a new mosque, not quite finished, built by the guardian of the tomb. When he and his followers tried to pray, there was a dispute with a group from a nearby mosque, who argued that the new mosque had not been *diresmikan* by the government, and that there could not be one *dusun* and two mosques. The police arrived and settled the disputes. Whether prayers took place there or not is not clear from the accounts. But the police came because there might have been violence, according to the man who took us on the boat trip. The challenges raised by the members of the established mosque against those attempting to pray in the new mosque were all a cover for protest against the man's heresy, we were told. Only a liberal would think that the dispute centered on the right to pray, or at least to pray with one's neighbors.

So there is Abdul Rauf di Singkel, who is said to be buried not here but in Banda Aceh, and who is also said to have a third tomb behind the mausoleum in Singkel. The true Abdul Rauf is elsewhere. But there is a true Abdul Rauf, and it does not seem to matter much to those who visit the grave or even speak about it here, which tomb, if any, for that matter, is his, historically speaking. That this present Abdul Rauf, fifteen feet tall, his tomb covered with white pebbles and with large white shells ending in curved fingers, is possibly the true one is not a point of dispute. That question is left aside. People simply know that there are three possibilities. The argument is about the legitimacy of the mosque. And behind this argument is the charge that the caretaker is a heretic. He has denied the basic communal ritual of Islam.

This does not make him, however, a charlatan. One does not hear that he tells lies for his own advancement or because he is eager for money. Indeed, one seldom hears these days the term "*rakus*," "greedy," which was common before Suharto, and this despite the many people accused—and these days even convicted—of corruption. The word became outmoded by the end of the New Order. Rather, people speak of the right to be the guardian of the tomb. How the present man established that right is said to be unknown. No doubt it has to do with his studies in a *pesantren* in West Sumatra, the place many people living here are from and the area said to be the major source of pilgrims. It is accepted that it is possible for a tomb to have its own power, which legitimates its guardian even if most people simply ignore precisely how that occurs.

What is left to contend about is the legitimacy not of the tomb, but of the mosque. There the rules are clear and agreed upon. Or almost so. The issue seems to come down to the power of the tomb versus the reading of the law. What is remarkable is not that there is conflict, but that the guardian has been able to establish himself at all. The police have come on several occasions, it is said. But there has been no final resolution. The police keep the peace by separating the two sides, not by arranging an agreement between them or by eliminating one of them.

One concludes that there is, here, an attempt to dominate the community by opposing one source of authority to another. But even here it is not clear that all of the small town of Singkel is affected. The protest was said to have been made by the people who live around the tomb. Nothing, it seems, can achieve dominance, neither religious nor political authority. When the new *kabupaten* (regency or subdivision of a province) is fully established, however, this might change. In any case, the competition between mosques resembles the conflicts between Muslims and Christians in East Java, which centered usually on the right of a church to establish itself. It is a question of

who will dominate Singkel or, better, of fear that someone will. The parties themselves lack not definition but the capacity to speak outside the most local definitions of belonging. There is scarcely a community here.

There are also *preman* (toughs) here. At least according to Mohammed. They take a cut from the fees collected for boat tickets. But, said Mohammed, they are afraid of him. The toughest *preman* in the world are, first, those from Colombia, and then those from Thailand, he said. Mohammed came from Thailand on a Thai boat, but he is originally Burmese. His mother was a Saudi, his father was born in Burma according to his use of that word. But his mother died when he was four months old. His stepmother did not like him. She put him to work at six years of age, and at age ten he sailed on a ship. His job was cutting vegetables and the like, and thus began his life as a sailor. He ended up as the captain of a Thai ship and was arrested in Indonesian waters for illegal fishing. He was sentenced to fourteen months' imprisonment, and the ship was auctioned off. He served his time, or some of it, on Sabang, where there is no jail. The small island was his prison. Then the navy needed an interpreter. He was brought to Singkel. He speaks Burmese, Thai, Malay, and English. When there is a need, he is sent for. So he is a foreigner, though now he has an Indonesian identity card, thanks to the Indonesian navy, despite the fact that he is a convicted criminal, also thanks to the Indonesian navy, and, by his own testimony a powerful *preman*. And yet he has a place in Singkel like anyone else here.

This social world is not one that accepts the equality of peoples but one that is suffused with indifference stemming from the lack of an overarching notion of assimilation or order. It is, finally, another version of the plural society where people meet only in the market, but where what is important is that there is a place to meet and where indifference to the particularities of social identity makes a society possible. These societies cannot be called "liberal" in the American sense since they are not based on a distinction between private and public. To describe them as "liberal" would imply that there is a notion of the public or the civil. The equivalent in Singkel is simply the government, which keeps order but without a sense that those kept in order can see themselves reflected in it. It is, even after the fall of Suharto and the democratic elections, the police, which has taken the place of the army, that is important. The incident of the mosque, however, indicates the unsettled state of things in such a society.

Mohammed met a poor girl, the daughter of a *becak* (trishaw) driver—his was one of the rare *becaks* without a motor, the owner is so poor. Mohammed married her, and they have two small children. He is a sympathetic man, who is at once proud of his toughness and, at the same time, able to adapt himself to wherever he is. He is obviously without good memories of his stepmother, but he has simply turned his back on her. He has a list of places to which he has sailed, ranging from Pakistan to the east throughout Southeast Asia to Taiwan. But he does not distinguish among these places. Asked if he wanted to return to visit Burma, he said he had brothers in Malaysia and Thailand, but that he had lost touch with them. Here he has a wife and two children. But this "here," like the "there" of Burma, Malaysia, or Thailand, has no definition other than being where relatives live. He repeated the same sentiment, and

practically the same sentence as the Chinese trader in Sidi Kalang: So long as one makes a living, one place is as good as another.⁷

One man from his neighborhood said of Mohammed that he was well liked because he was without envy or jealousy. And this seems to be true. Chance brought Mohammed to Singkel. He is established there by the fact of marriage and by being a polyglot. In a strict sense, there is no language that belongs to the place; there are only lingua franca. So it is not his facility with the language of Singkel that helps him to find himself here. It is his knowledge of the languages of those who might come to Singkel (and get in trouble with the authorities). It is his established foreignness, as it were, that lets him be at home to the extent that he is. One has the impression that, after leaving Burma, after the replacement of one (good) mother by another (bad) mother, all places that receive him are equally not his and offer an equal possibility of habitation. If he is not jealous of others, it is because others remain as such. He can deal with them, even like and sometimes love them, but he does not think of taking their place. And in that sense he is the perfect "citizen" (the word is inexact) of the plural society.

In this way, he exemplifies, through exaggeration, the way in which people belong to Singkel society. Singkel is a small place but neither a village nor a city. Everyone is an immigrant or the descendent of one, a guest (*jaméei*), even if born here. Everyone is accepted, even a Burmese, even a criminal. But, as in a village, everyone is known or capable of being so. The definitions that people carry with them refer to their origins elsewhere, but, at the same time, there is a place—this area—which is marked by the facts of *pendatang*—of "comers." As though everyone arrived by accident. There are many from Padang, but there are also Batak—Pakpak primarily—and others too. But though everyone is a guest, there is no host. The word "Aceh" is, particularly now, too ambiguous. For instance, there is the owner of the hotel who identified himself to me as an Acehnese, but, when Ismael tried to speak Acehnese with him, said he was "*jaméei*" and could not speak Acehnese.

Singkel, like the other cities of the west coast, is not a political society nor a cultural one, but for centuries now it has been a society always in the making and never accomplished. With no overarching code of its own to regulate the relations of the groups. With a strong Islam, which is open to dispute when it comes to regulating daily life. And where the national government is as suspect as the opposition to it.

⁷ At this point, I would like to insert Ben Anderson's comment on this paragraph about Mohammed, since it explains much and opens up even more questions about this remarkably sympathetic character: "The term 'Burmese' needs specification. One reason the generals changed the name of the country to Myanmar was the constant confusion between 'ethnic group' and state-subject or citizen, for which people used Burman versus Burmese, or vice versa, in a confusing way. If you use 'Burmese' here, the reader will conclude that Mohammed is an ethnic Burman and maybe will have his doubts, in that the Burmans are notoriously Theravada Buddhist. But Myanmar's citizens include plenty of Muslims, mostly on the Bay of Bengal coastline, *mujahidin* who are basically Bangladeshis *avant la lettre*, and some Arakanese. But the whole story seems unlikely. Saudi women are famously *pardahed*, and even today do not travel without male escorts. How would such a woman meet a 'Burmese'? Likeliest, maybe only a possibility, is if the 'Burmese' were on a pilgrimage to Mecca, but even this sounds unlikely. It is much more plausible that one should substitute 'Bangladeshi' or '*mujahidin*' for 'Saudi.' Maybe *mujahidin* or Arakanese for 'Burmese.' Or perhaps Mohammed made all this up! If Mohammed came on a Thai boat, then he was an illegal migrant into Thailand, of which there are today perhaps a million. Most cross overland, but some by small boats." Many thanks to Ben Anderson for this and many other apt suggestions and corrections.

That there are *preman*, figures one thinks of as from the city, in a place of this size does not reflect its urban character—the possibility of belonging to it and yet being anonymous—but rather the lack of a dominating culture that might restrain such activities. And, at the same time, the *preman* demonstrate the town's polycultural character, able to take in even figures whom one would think would be anomalous to it.

There are said to be no Chinese in Singkel, and we saw none. Or almost none. When we said we saw one to someone who had told us they did not exist, he said, “oh him. *Sudah membaaur. Miskin dia*” (Oh him. He mixed in. He is poor). Apparently, if one is not rich, one is not Chinese. And we could find no Chinese businesses. This is the result of the famous p.p. 10, the regulation made under Sukarno that banished Chinese from the countryside and countryside towns, according to several people.

Meulaboh, Sunday, December 23, 2007

The clerk at the hotel desk, when asked if Meulaboh were better or worse (*lebih bagus*) today or before the tsunami, said, “Before, the buildings were wood, now they are cement. It's better.” What about the people who lost their houses? “Now everyone lives in the same size house. There is no difference between the rich and the poor.” Is this for the better? “It's better for us. The rich don't like it.”



Rudi, “Geronimo Kid”

Rudi, aka Geronimo Kid, came up to me in an Acehnese coffee shop and introduced himself. He is a “cameraman,” and he has a band. Rudi was born in 1972. His house was right on the beach. When the second earthquake came, he took his parents and went uphill until the water receded. He complained that the distribution of new housing was not what it ought to be. That the rich got houses and not the poor. (The same complaint was heard in Singkel where Mohammed, whose house was destroyed, did not get a replacement. Replacements were reserved for homeowners, and he had rented.) Rudi said Meulaboh had changed. It's easier to make money now, but because of all the NGOs, the foreigners, prices have gone way up. Rents have doubled and more. So it's difficult. And he repeated that Meulaboh was “*semrawut*,” chaotic. Before one knew everyone, but this isn't true now. The traffic is not organized, and there are hypnotists on the street. Just the other day, a woman was a victim. She was walking and was tapped on the arm. The person took all her gold jewelry. No one knows who they are. This moral disorganization is the major effect of the tsunami, he said.

I asked him about the number of people who had died and how people took it. He said that thirty thousand people lost their lives. But that those who survived just continued. He said that here people are *kuat* Islam, devout Muslims, and so they continue. Throughout this conversation, he urged me to come to his house and see the videos he collected of the tsunami. He wouldn't charge me anything.

Talked with a merchant who bought *hasil laut*, fish and sea food, and sent it to Banda Aceh and other places. His place is near the shore. Made of concrete, it survived the tsunami. He showed me the line left where the water had risen—the height of the first floor. He lost seven relatives, including grandchildren and others. The thing is, after the earthquake they went outside the house. People shouted, “high water”—*air besar*—but many would not believe it. They thought it was just the creek rising. They didn't suspect that it was a tsunami (he did not use the word). He and his wife left. Those who stayed all died.

I have condensed his account and thus dramatized it. He told it matter-of-factly. He was not without feeling, but he did not celebrate the fact that he survived and others did not, nor did he seem to feel the loss deeply. In his memory of the tsunami, the event was not a matter that mainly concerned particular people who had died, but was a catastrophe sent by God. I asked him what he did when he remembered those who had died. He said, “Well, Allah called them. It's like a plane crash. We are still alive.” “Yah, dipanggil Allah. Seperti kapal terbang jatuh. Kita panjang umur.”

His, indeed, is the repeated sentiment. “Kita Islam.” “We are Muslims.” In the 1960s, people said that death was a test sent by God. But here he did not say this. He did not celebrate his survival as a sign of his religious faith. It is rather a question of fact. Of an order of things that one can accept. The power to do so comes from Islam. It is not a denial of feeling, or not entirely, but an idea that makes it useless to mourn. (I neglected to ask if his wife felt as he did.) He is not special because he survived. His survival does not lead to guilt nor to a feeling that he has somehow incorporated the death that he escaped and it has improved him. What he has is simply “*panjang umur*,” which means “life extended” or “long life” and “life is being extended.” A fact of the past that continues into now. And it is a phrase used when you part from someone; that person might well wish you *panjang umur*. Here it was used almost with irony.

One got what one wished for or what others wished you to have. This is what it is, or, to put it more pompously than he intended, "this is our situation today."

He pointed to the empty space in front of us. There had been an entire village of wooden houses there. All were swept away. He said earlier, telling me of his family and others killed, that it was not the earthquake that killed them and not the flood, it was the debris, the "*sampah*" in the water. He explained that "*kita terjepit*," "we were caught in the tsunami," and made a gesture, knocking his head. It was the wood from this village, carried off by the flood, that caught those who were in the water. When he pictures what happened to them, he identifies with them. When he speaks of it, he does so again, using the word for "we" to refer to "them" and to include even his interlocutor, namely me. Again, he did not dramatize. But it is evident to him that this village, bordering on his own store and home, killed its inhabitants. People were killed by the wreckage of their own homes and were reduced to wreckage themselves.

He also said that Meulaboh was different. Here there is no "demo," no protest to the DPRD (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah, the provincial congress), nothing of that sort. People just *cari nafkah*, they just carry on trying to make a living. They don't want to go anywhere else. Here one can still get Rp.50,000 a day. But elsewhere it would only be Rp.10,000. They will not be swept away. They refuse. But this refusal is not a moral position. It is dedramatized. It is rather an unconscious refusal to be either victim or actor in the drama of the calamity, even though it was evident that this man felt as much. Instead, one once again makes a living.

But in the landscape, where the event is memorialized in the reconstruction, in the rows of identical houses, and in the unreconstructed remains, the event is still present. It is nature turned into buildings. Buildings embodying not the imperatives of right behavior proper to a house, a market, a shop, but nature embodied in the fact of destruction and the necessity for replacement. In the identical buildings, where rich and poor are alike, there is a leveling of differences, an effect of death.

But he refuses to move. One *cari nafkah*, "tries to make a living." The economy is the morality. One makes a living in a place of lack of difference, where the social has been truncated but where one plants oneself down and something from underneath, a force of life, asserts itself. *Panjang umur*. To appeal to authority, to make oneself a victim, to formulate one's situation and demands, would make this force something else, something conscious rather than something that works through one.

But of course there are complaints. He points to the new houses in front of us, where the village was, and complains that much money was provided but that contractors took cuts and houses were ill-made or incomplete. And he shows me new boats sunk in the harbor. Eighty percent of the boats were purchased through aid funds, but the boats weren't made here and aren't suitable to their intended purpose. Two sunken boats were right in front of us.

Later, as we were walking through a complex of these new houses, a woman, sitting with her husband and one of her children, invited us to sit with them. She knew (incorrectly) that we were from an NGO. They got the house as a replacement for one that was swept away. It was on the same spot, quite close to the sea, but they refused to move because here they are close to work. She is a nurse; he is retired. Look, she said, they gave us this house, but they did not finish it. There is no kitchen. Please get

us a kitchen. She took me through the house to the back. The concrete walls ended and a provisional kitchen with wooden walls and a plastic roof had been put up. Though we told her we were not from an NGO, she refused to believe it. White people in Meulaboh today could be nothing else. And the NGOs have money and can give her a kitchen. She asked several times for the kitchen and could not accept that we could not give her one. Certainly if I had a kitchen with me, I would have given it to her. She did not talk about corruption, though there is a lot of talk about uncompleted houses being the result of corruption.

She demanded a whole house, but by a right that was not clear. Some people got completed houses, and she did not. Where exactly the benefice came from went unquestioned. The aid that came from so many places in the world fell on Meulaboh, a place heard of by the world the last time in 1883, when Acehese fighting the Dutch kidnapped the crew of an English ship. Aid simply struck Meulaboh, not only *as a result* of the tsunami, but in a like manner. There was a flood of money. This woman did not pose as a victim, as she might well have since she and her family barely escaped the flood. She took for herself the right to what was being given, but the lack of an established source to the aid left her complaining as an individual and not as a member of any category other than that given by the aid agencies—"tsunami victim." It was not as a mother, an Acehese, an Indonesian, or any other possible identification of herself that she felt an entitlement. Her relation to the aid agencies and their differing provenance was never talked about. This left her simply as a human being with a terrible experience. But as such she could make a demand only in a voice close to that of a child.

Rudi, the man who styled himself as "Geronimo Kid" when he introduced himself to me, has flowing black hair, which, he says, frightens people at first, along with his black jeans and black tee shirt. He sometimes ties his hair up in a ponytail when he wants to make a gentler impression. But once he opens his mouth, he can frighten no one. His sweetness melts through his words. He is in his thirties. He had just come back from "shooting." Meaning he was filming a group singing on the beach. He does this for ceremonies and so on and makes his living that way. He told me several times that he had collected films and pictures from the tsunami and I was welcome to see them and even have them, gratis. We got in touch with him and saw some of the films. One was made by the army. It showed soldiers collecting bodies, people fleeing, the water carrying *sampah*. Quite gruesome. There were only soldiers at work. This is because, for one thing, for the first three days the army did not allow anyone into Meulaboh. The reason given was that they were afraid that GAM would take weapons. But in those three days there was considerable looting. It is, said Rudi, an "open secret" who did it. He described how no bodies had jewelry left on them. They were stripped of anything valuable.

He took us to Geronimo Kid Studio, as it is called. It is down a lane, in a house with a tile front and woven sides. It resembles a warehouse. In the studio, he has amplifiers and electric guitars for his band. When he talks about music, music itself is never mentioned. He sticks to the brand names of the guitars, when and where he bought

them, what he used to own, and so on. He sleeps on the floor in the same room where he does his editing. He prefers to stay here rather than with his parents, who live in Meulaboh also. Here he can sleep late and do what he wants. Sometimes at night he watches these films. He told us he wanted the "*orisinal*," the original, which for him is on the film. Asked about the music that has been added to the film made by the army, he said he would not have done it. It was to make it seem "*sedih*," sad. But the *orisinal* is better. As we drove around with him, he would point out the places we had seen in the film. Most of it was quite recognizable. The film added value, it seemed, to what we saw.

Rudi took us to three mass graves. One, a rectangle with barbed wire around it, had a sign "Mass Grave" and the date of the tsunami. There are three of these on the edge of the sea. As we were watching, a man lifted up the barbed wire and settled down under the tree next to a woman. I asked Rudi what he was doing. "*Nyantai*" (relaxing) was the answer.

Another grave was surrounded by a cement wall with the same sign. And inside the wall was another sign listing the amount of money spent on the grave. A third had a makeshift stone enclosure, but it was hard to distinguish from the land around it. In any case, the graves are not only not tended, but they are themselves, as well as the area around them, places for *pacar-pacaran*, trysting places.

There is, then, only an ambiguous quality to the graves. Asked if there are not ghosts, *hantu*, here, Rudi said, "Yes, but they don't frighten anyone." It reminded me of the video and of his emphasis on the *asli* or "original." The original is in the films. Even with the music, it is still there, he said. The *asli* is the image of the events, of the dead. It is the ghosts who do not terrify. But who haunt nonetheless. He returns to them and wants others to see them. For one thing, it is his profession. But it is not exactly the preservation of the memory he seems to be interested in. As he said, when we asked why the graves were not taken care of, it was first of all because the government is what it is. "Indonesia is ranked first in the world in corruption," he said. But it is also because they are mass graves, he said. These are not the graves of individuals. Were they that, then people might take care of them. And, in fact, in one case, we saw that two areas were covered with white stones, of the type used on graves, making them the graves of individuals. No doubt there are two because whoever did this lost two persons.

For the rest, these areas are covered with the debris from the tsunami, the fill used when the graves were covered over. Here is the appearance of "*sampah*" again. And the graveyards are full of lots of debris. The impression of litter is heightened by the irregularities of the earth, with trenches and large mounds within the closed-off areas. These declivities do not trace any definable areas. They are not like the frames for individual grave sites, which express the length and width of the corpse. As Rudi said, these are mass graves, with the loss of definition that implies. And with that loss of definition, the former presences whose bodies are here turn into only the palest of ghosts. They are not exactly ghosts of particular persons, or if they are, their identities could never be established. This inability to reach to the "*asli*," the "original," makes them benign as ghosts. Either that, or they are generalized, the ghosts of everyone, death as such. Whichever the case, the ghosts are present but harmless. Between their

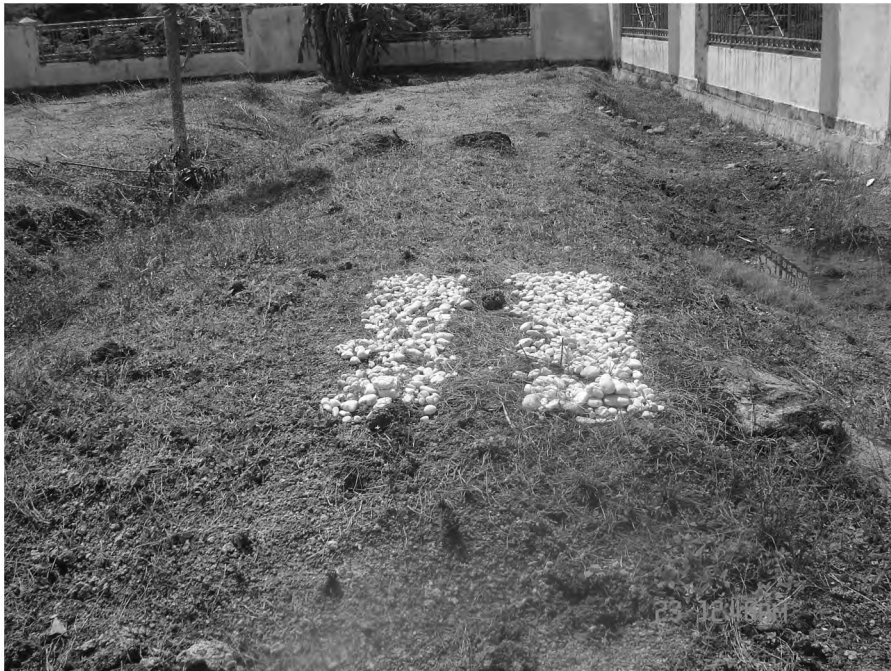
images (or however it is they make themselves felt) and their origins there is benign confusion.



Two mass graves in Meulaboh



Inside the most elaborate mass grave in Meulaboh



Another view of the grave pictured above. White stones are often put on graves.

So long as there are ghosts, the dead are not forgotten. Their lack of force seems to attest to the lack of differentiation that characterizes both these dead and the new situation in Meulaboh, where there is no difference between rich and poor. As a result, one does not know who is who. No harm comes to you, but nothing works as it should. According to Rudi, the city is now *semrawut*, without discernable principle to its order, or perhaps without order altogether. It works, but it seems as though it does not. One does not know who is who; the traffic is confused, and there are traffic jams. But everything works all right.

As we were driving to the place where the *sampah* was brought, in the countryside with *kelapa sawit* (oil palm) plantations around it, Rudi pointed out the places where the GAM or the TNI, one did not know which, would drop the bodies of their victims. "Sometimes in the *selokan*," or gutters. People were suspected of being "*mata-mata*," or informers. They would be killed, and then their relatives or someone would take revenge, and more bodies would be produced. But no one could be sure whose side, if any, the informers were on. People were caught between the two sides, the victims of both sides without necessarily being on either. This is, indeed, *semrawut*—the lack of perceptible (public) order, where it is impossible to locate yourself within a system. And this perceived lack of order is a danger that hangs on today, three years later, even if in an attenuated form. These spots where bodies were left, often far from the place of the killings, often of people never identified, are known to everyone, but nothing in particular marks them. They are places in the landscape that are visible only if you can see them, as it were; places where the dead still are present even if their bodies are not. But these ghosts which do not harm anyone are an accepted part of Meulaboh society. One more addition to the mix, another *jaméi*. Two catastrophes blend into each other and, without changing the structure of that society, change its tonality.

A woman, about in her fifties. She lost two teenage daughters. The *gempa* (earthquake) came. Her husband drove up on the motorbike. It was Sunday, and her daughters got up late. The key was in the motorbike. Her husband had forgotten and left it there. (This is the only mention of the girls' father in her account.) The two girls took the bike to see the ruins left by the earthquake. They went without telling their parents; she did not see their faces. They were carried off, their bodies never recovered. For two years this woman cried everyday. She had never left them out of her sight. They were never apart from her. Now she goes everyday if she can to the mass graves and feels better. But the bodies were not identified, and she thinks maybe they got lost and don't know how to get home. She herself doesn't dream of them except in "*mimpi kilat*," in snatches. But their older sister, who apparently lives with her mother and has two small children, the older one six months old at the time of the tsunami, does. The girls say they are at the Mohammadiyah orphanage, not far from here. The dream means that that was where they were carried off. In her dream, her sisters are dressed in blue.

This woman did not go back to work for six months. She is a school teacher. Her superintendent stopped her salary. But other teachers stopped work and were not docked. There was a distribution of money at the school for those with victims in their

families. She did not get any, though she was entitled to it. She complained at the school and at the *bupati's* office. It is not that she wants money; it is the lack of "*keadilan*," of justice, from her boss and others. It is because of corruption that people who were never victims were given money and she was not. She did not once say that Allah had taken her children, that "*apa boleh buat*" (what can you do), that "*panjang umur*" (life goes on). She did not mention God at all in connection with her children. She did not complain about the injustice of their deaths. But at the injustice of the school superintendent she is furious. Were she to speak of God, she would be obliged to accept their deaths, and she will not. But the injustice of their deaths is nonetheless there. To speak of it would be to introduce the social into the event. As it is, their deaths are hers. It is her experience, and it is incomparable.

But at the moment when a question of recognition arises, when a third party intervenes between her and her lost children, so too does a question of justice. The injustice belongs to the state. The state's refusal to recognize her loss means that it is all the more only hers. People, agencies, help her. She has a new house. But no one comes to her aid in her grief. She should, according to her religion, or at least men's version of it, accept her loss. As she does not. Whatever sympathy she gets (and surely she gets some) is oblique and without reassurance. The man who speaks of *panjang umur*, of extending life or of life going on, does not exactly think of his strength as stemming from his experience of the catastrophe. The strength to continue was established before that, and it answers to this situation and others. For this woman, however, there is nothing to draw on. Nothing she went through at that time brought out something in herself usable to help her survive; nor did her religion or other training help her respond to the catastrophe.

Rudi took us to see this woman. He plans to make a documentary about Meulaboh. He has gathered the images made by others, and he will use them. But he could not say what the shape of the documentary would be. When I suggested that this woman telling her story would certainly be appropriate, he did not respond at all. It is evident he does not share our notion of witness. He speaks of the "original," but he does not seem to want to preserve the event and have others see it. He got a camera for the first time after the event and after he had collected others' reports. He "shoots," as he terms it, everyday and for any purpose at all. This continuous shooting, the making of images, is itself the goal, it seems. It is not done to preserve memory but to track and perhaps take part in another version of the *semrawut*, the disorder, he feels is the state of affairs. He explained the word *semrawut* twice with the example of traffic. People go in the wrong direction, there are unrecognizable people on the street and so on. There is no order that he can perceive. It used to be that everyone knew each other. Recognition was always sure. But now there are strangers, which means that one is not recognized, or one is misrecognized, and by whom is not clear. On the other hand, Rudi boasts that everyone knows him, and everywhere we go, people of all ages call out his name. So it is true now, as it was then. But Meulaboh before the tsunami, and maybe before the GAM, seems to him a place where there were no strangers. Where everyone knew him for what he was. What he seems to fear is what the woman above said—that at school it was a long time before people knew she had lost two children, and she herself did not know who was missing from the school. And even two years later, someone came to the door and asked for Julia, one of her daughters. It is a city where those one has in mind may no longer be there. The purpose of "shooting" is not

to assuage a loss or to testify to it. It is to see in these images what circulates still. It ensures the presence of the living and the dead. This would be the “documentary,” as he termed it, that he would like to make in Meulaboh.



A banner in Sigli
 “The Era of the Conflict is Over
 Peace, Reconciliation, and Prosperity are the Era of the Future”

December 25, 2007

Just before leaving, in a coffee shop on the main street. A woman futilely sweeping in front of the neighboring shop. I asked about her, taking her for one of the mad people one sees often enough in markets. The first remark of the man I asked was, “Dia tidak nakal,” “she does not bother anyone,” “she is not sexually promiscuous.” She sleeps in the shop next door. She is cleanly dressed, so someone takes care of her. But the man did not know her history or would not tell me.

Banda Aceh, December 25, 2007

Yesterday Ismael, our driver, told us of his experience of the tsunami. A man from Medan who had a daughter at Sjahkuala, the university in Banda Aceh, asked him to drive him and his wife there and to stay with them until they found her, “dead or alive.” They found her on the street where bodies had been temporarily placed, and

buried her in the yard of a relative who lives in Banda Aceh. However, initially they wanted Ismael to drive the body back to Medan for burial there. It would be wrapped and tied to the top of the car. He refused. "*Tidak sanggup*." "Not up to it," he repeated each time I asked him why. At first he could not explain. He said he was willing to help them to find someone else, but he would not do that. "*Tidak sanggup*." "Not up to it." Finally he said that no matter how carefully one washed the car, a trace would remain.

He repeated the phrase "*tidak sanggup*" several times. The admission was vaguely shameful. It indicated a force he could not stand up to. The trace of the girl (*bekas*), what is left, the remnant, is here conceived as a sort of dirt or even garbage. It is out of place, as Mary Douglas would have it, it should be washed away. The trace might be invisible, but it is still there. Like the places where bodies were found during the conflict, something—here a tsunami victim—that looks innocent has another meaning, a meaning that is unforgettable in the sense that one may not want to think about it, but one is obliged to by something in the environment close to one.

In a coffee shop we met a woman having breakfast with her husband. She told us, eventually, that he was her second husband. Her first husband had been killed by the GAM. And then she corrected herself, saying by the "*GAM palsu*," the "false GAM." Her husband had worked for the fertilizer plant in Lho' Seumawe, where she is from. The GAM had asked her, she said—then corrected herself—they asked her husband for Rp7,000,000 (US\$800). They knew he was from the plant, and they expected him to get the money there. He could not, and they killed him. It was the GAM *palsu*. The real GAM, she said, "had badges and name cards," like the sort JTS saw in Lho' Seumawe a few years ago when he was taken into a coffee shop in the countryside to meet GAM members and everyone, perhaps twenty people, held up their GAM identity cards—laminated plastic, with pictures and names. According to this woman, the real GAM only wanted Acehnese suffering to end. Now the conflict is over, but Aceh is not *merdeka*, not yet independent or not yet free, and unless it is *merdeka*, Aceh, which is rich, will see its wealth flow outside its borders. I said, but look at all the development in Aceh now and look, the GAM has been elected all over Aceh, they run the government. She explained that all projects and so on had to go through a committee, and that members were ex-GAM. But this is not enough. Until Aceh is independent, Acehnese will suffer.

The true GAM and the false GAM continue to exist today. The true GAM is distinct from the people in power, according to her. It is generally acknowledged that there is considerable corruption. Things would be different, it seems, if the true GAM won. This from a woman whose husband was killed in the name of the GAM but who is also proud that her uncle is a minister in the GAM-in-exile and has been to Sweden, where its titular leader resides. The resurgence of the true GAM would mean prosperity and a lack of suffering.

When I asked her how it would be determined who was Acehnese and who was not—among those with mixed parentage, those born outside Aceh, those born of Acehnese parents who did not speak Acehnese, the people of the West Coast, the *jaméi*, etc.—she said yes, there were people like that, but then she went on to talk about the wealth of the province. I had the impression that all questions of identity would be resolved once the true GAM was in power. No more false GAM, no more

corrupt GAM, and everyone would know who the other was and who one was oneself. Or, more likely, in the coastal cities, identity is simply not problematic.



A banner in Banda Aceh
 “Independent [in English] Aceh. The moment THEY use the word, WE supply the meaning behind the facts and events”

December 26

Today, December 26, is the third anniversary of the tsunami. There are prayers in the various mosques. We went to the port of Banda Aceh first, where the tsunami struck perhaps as hard as anywhere. One sees vast empty stretches and also new housing. The Kuburan Massal (Mass Grave)—as these sites are labeled—there are very big. They are also well kept. One has a fence with the attributes of Allah spelled out in Arabic letters all around it, or, rather, not a fence, but markers with incomplete enclosures linking them. There is a gate of a type I have not seen in Indonesia, with high green metal doors that open to form oblique spaces so that one enters and exits at an angle. Inside, there is the large empty space, but this time, unlike in Meulaboh, it is planted with grass and leveled off. Signs tell people to keep off the area. Behind the grave, but fully visible, are the remaining frames of two double-story buildings, left there, it seems, by accident. In any case, these are the only true ruins I can remember seeing. People stay on the path that leads down the middle of the grave. Women, for the most part, were there reciting the Koran.



The mass grave near Banda Aceh



The mass grave on the opposite side of Banda Aceh from the one pictured above

On the other side of Banda Aceh there is an even larger mass grave. This one has an uncompleted fence around it. The sides are still open, but there is a cement channel, presumably for drainage, which serves as a barrier. No one trespasses across it onto the grave. Women mainly—maybe even 80 percent of the visitors are women—sit and once again devote themselves to the Koran or perhaps the small pamphlets that give the excerpts from the Koran, the verses one chants on the occasion of death. Some graves in Meulaboh were marked off. But here the markings are different, more elaborate. A sacred space, unavailable to anyone except those with permission, has been created. Instead of being a trysting place, as in Meulaboh, this is a place for the dead, to the exclusion of the living. The government by its authority has produced the elementary division between sacred and secular.

In Banda Aceh, many if not most recovered bodies were brought to collection points. The bodies were left in the open at certain crossroads where relatives came searching for them. They were then loaded into dump trucks and taken to the open graves. There are three other mass graves, including the elaborately landscaped one mentioned above. There are some smaller graves, but the process of burying tsunami victims was centralized under the control of the government. This accounts for the definition of the event. It is by authority of the government, it is said, that one is not allowed to walk on the graves. In both places, there is individual grieving, mainly by women. But the collective definition of the loss of life comes from the government, which does not allow anyone to touch the graves. And the government renders the deaths so that they become something that belongs to it as much as to those who actually lost relatives. It makes of death itself a question of collective memory, which it is not—or at least not in the same way at all—in Meulaboh. In Meulaboh, there is plenty of grief, and there are stories in common. But they are not consolidated into particular sites with a special aura which then is recognized as an expression of “Aceh” in its official mode. In Meulaboh, there is also a sublimation of grief into sexuality for the young, in place of an expression of death. For those people at these sites the frisson of death informs the relations of the sexes and produces harmless ghosts.

The stance of the provincial government toward the tsunami can be read on a billboard put up in Banda Aceh by the Dinas INFOKOM Prov. NAD. (Dinas Informasi dan Komunikasi Provinsi Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam, or Information and Communication Service of the Province of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam). The writing has as its background what looks like a satellite photo of the city after it was hit and a blank map of Aceh. On the side are four photos of more damage, but this time, photos from the ground. It is, for the government, a “*tragedi*,” an event that needs a foreign word, but a word now often used in Indonesia, and one that affects “humankind.” The word for “humankind,” *kemanusiaan*, is more abstract even than our “humanity.” The photos of this billboard are unlikely to be viewed individually, given that the billboard is mounted on the edge of a congested traffic circle where several streets intersect. At the same time, there is a montage, or a movement between pictures, made all the more effective because the pictures are necessarily seen as a fast-moving series. One who bothers to look will know that this fast action itself is meant to represent the tsunami for the inscription alone will relay that message, even if he misses the details. Moving by this billboard, one has an impression of watching the beginning of a TV program or a movie. Except that instead of expecting more to come in a linear fashion, we sense that the Government of Aceh sits over or in front of the catastrophe. The *tragedi* is in

the background, under its control. It is the government of Aceh that “*mengenang*,” that calls to mind or commemorates what is in the background, that summons up the images, that owns and, if one takes this elaborate creation seriously, controls them.⁸



Banda Aceh
 “The Government of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam
 Commemorates 3 Years
 The Human Tragedy
 Earthquake and Tsunami
 26 December 2004”⁹

⁸ At this point, I want to insert the trenchant comment of Ben Anderson on the sign pictured above: “This is a weird style of bureaucratic ad-speak. ‘*Mengenang* xxxxx Years’ is like ‘Celebrating Third Anniversary’ (as in, *mengenang 3 tahun berdirinja mesjid agung*). The next line is still part of the sentence: ‘Remembering 3rd anniversary of [a] Tragedy of Humankind, the E and T of 26 December.’ What is hovering behind ‘Tragedi Kemanusiaan’ is the Guinness Book of Records. A sort of World-class Tragedy, confirmed by all the aid that came pouring in. Not merely a National Tragedy. Wonderfully ghastly.”

⁹ The syntax of this banner is even less grammatical than those of most banners. Perhaps this is because to render it in proper linguistic form, Indonesian or English, it would read: “The Government of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam Commemorates the Third Anniversary of the Tragedy of Humanity, Namely the Earthquake and Tsunami of 26 December 2004. See the note on this same inscription in the Appendix.

Yusni Sabi, the rector of IAIN (Institut Agama Islam Negeri, State Institute of Islamic Studies), Ar-Raniri, told me that the conflict would never have been settled if it weren't for the tsunami. After Suharto, there had been reasonable attempts by the government to find a solution, but they were not acceptable. But the tsunami killed people from every side and every way of life, including army and police as well as GAM. After that, people were tired. Yusni Sabi, as rector of Ar-Raniri, is likely to be the next governor. He is sixty-four years old. He told me that what was important in government today is proper budgeting. There are bureaucrats and officials in jail today. Not all of them are bad people, but they did not know how to manage budgets (he might have added that budgets are larger now) and, as a result, regulations were broken and these officials went to jail. He said that today the police and prosecutors are alert; many cases of corruption and criminality that never before would have been brought to trial now rather quickly come to court. The problem from his point of view is not criminality as a product of the search for gain, but criminality as a result of the uncontrolled circulation of money.

Yusni also said that women are discouraged from visiting the graves, or going with the men at the time of burial, because they are "*emosi*." In Aceh, women do not usually attend burials, but they, and not men, are usually the ones to visit graves after that. This despite the fact that they are discouraged from doing so.

Reza Idris and Azhari from an NGO called Tikar Pandan were at the meeting with Yusni Sabi. Their NGO teaches writing and is generally politically engaged. In one of their writing classes, they asked students to describe figures that were important locally but not heard of elsewhere. The students chose, amongst others, a mad person who wears only a towel, is dirty, and so on. This man has been around for several generations of students. According to the students, this "mad man" (*orang gila*) was once a brilliant economist.

When one walks through Banda Aceh today, men in the street, *becak* drivers and so on, are likely to extend their hands and say, "Welcome to Aceh." This is the result of the influx of aid and foreign aid workers with it. This greeting replaces "Hello Mister" and, to my mind, is equally ambiguous. In any case, when a white man meets a stranger here, the assumption, as we have already seen, is that the former might well bring with him lots of money and help, especially for housing or the improvement of the latter. We are walking figures made of money, and they can touch us. This was true before the tsunami, but it is even more strongly the case today.

Towers: There are communications towers for cell phones all over Aceh. They are as at home in the forests as in the cities. I suppose there could never be a proper place for them, but in Aceh they are often placed in such a way as to disrupt the sense of their surroundings. As, for instance, when one sees one rising over a mosque. They seem unlikely ever to be landmarks or to belong in any special place. They bring with them no hint at all of how to behave when one is touched by their ambiance, as does, for instance, a house, or, to continue our example, a mosque. Their determined neutrality is nonetheless unsettling, since it dissolves the ambiance of whatever the towers are set next to. They are anonymous as well as being neutral. One, for instance, was torn down by workmen who mistook it for a structure owned by their company. Unless one has a professional interest in these towers, one dismisses them from the scene. They seem to go unnoticed in the landscape, but it is more accurate to say that

they are dismissed from the view. They don't belong, and yet they are not foreign because one knows that they play a part in everyday lives. One would not think of giving directions by reference to them—"turn left at the cell phone tower"—in part because they follow their own routes without relation to roads. They are not landmarks but their linguistic neutrality—they convey any language and many at once—nonetheless inflects the sense of the landscape.

It is possible that they make a difference in the mourning or the lack of it that goes on here. The sense of being always connected, and no matter at what distance, and no matter with whom or from where, is not necessarily benign. With that in mind, the difference between Banda Aceh's and Meulaboh's treatment of the dead—the making sacred in Banda Aceh, the seat of government, and not in Meulaboh—makes sense. Banda Aceh is the norm, or the wished-for norm. The boys from Komunitas Tikar Pandan were shocked when I told them of lovers at the site of the mass graves of Meulaboh. "*Tidak etis*" (It's not ethical), one said. I explained, and one said, "*Bukan di Aceh*" (not in Aceh), as though in Aceh a mindset that would transform death into life, in which the charge of death would be converted into sexuality and reproduction, is unthinkable. In Banda Aceh, which considers itself to be the source of communications, whose officials speak all the time to the people, reminding them about narcotics, illegal weapons, watching television, remembering the tsunami, being careful in the supermarket, etc., such communication between living and dead is shocking. But in Meulaboh, it is one more form of connection, not so different from what passes through the transmission towers. The mass graves, in that sense, are invisible communication towers. They communicate another relation to the dead altogether. One is always connected, to anyone, at any distance in any language.

December 27, to the grave of Sjech Sayid Abdul Wahab, "*orang Arab*," one of the first, along with Abdul Rauf di Singkel, to bring Islam to Aceh. He, too, is fifteen-feet long. Asked if it is possible the man could have been so tall, those at the monument simply said, "*ya, mana bisa?*" (right, how could it be?), but the discrepancy is not surprising and not upsetting. Another fact.

Bireuen, December 28, 2007

At the point of intersection, where the highway between Medan–Banda Aceh meets the highway to Takengon. This was one of the strongholds of the GAM, and it is also one of the places where the *syariat* police are most active. It wasn't affected by the tsunami, though of course the earthquake was felt. It has vastly expanded since the 1960s. Then it was a small town. Now it is a city. But it still is an *entrepôt*. A man on the street, a parking attendant, spoke to me. I asked him if he were from Bireuen. He had lived here all this life. I said it must have been difficult during the *konflik*. He said yes, that he was GAM and that all Acehnese, even young children, are GAM. This is a standard answer. There is an evasiveness in many men when speaking with us. But they do not hide their political affiliation. At the same time, he, like many others, said he was frightened. That the danger was not the GAM and not the TNI, but it was the informers. They could endanger your life. A young woman, twenty-six years old, Javanese by identification, but born here, told us that during the conflict no one went out after 5:00 pm. It wasn't just being Javanese that made you afraid. Everyone,

meaning Acehnese, too, did not know what would happen to those who were out after dark. She refused to accept my suggestion that women and Javanese were in greater danger. It was generalized, she insisted. A danger that affected all persons, no matter who they were. One did not know who the killers were. It was in that period that the newspapers adopted the term OTK, *Orang yang Tidak di Kenal*, unknown person, a phrase still used now to speak of criminals who have not been identified and which was used then to speak of corpses found in various places.

The alternative answer when asked if he was afraid, at least from one man, was, “... mana bisa? Mereka [meaning TNI] ada senjata. Kami ada senjata juga.” (What for? They—the TNI—had weapons. We had weapons too.) I said to this man that, in my opinion, the GAM had won. He, and others, agreed. One man said that the present *bupati* and governor and others had been in prison before and now, look, they are in office. But at the same time, this does not bring with it a feeling of security, judging by the climate of the city.

There is not much more that people say. One does not have a discussion about the GAM. People do not go much further than identifying themselves as GAM supporters, as the man noted above did. The answers are stereotyped, and each person seems to speak for everyone. If the stereotypes were not there, the nervousness that one feels here might perhaps turn to fear.

As it is, the preoccupation is the economy. Bireuen is the seat of a new *kabupaten* (regency), and there is a gigantic palace-like building under construction on the side of the highway at the edge of town. We are asked if we have “projects”; those who question us hope to find employment. There is a lot of money around. The ex-*bupati*, Mustafa A. Glanggang, was arrested for corruption. The newspaper *Serambi Indonesia*, circulating this morning in Bireuen, has a picture of him in a prisoner’s orange tee shirt. It reports that before the news of his arrest was made public, it was broadcast everywhere. The newspaper reports not only the news, but the fact that its own reporters were scooped. This seems practically as interesting as the arrest. They report that “the news was spread everywhere. Subscribers to SMS services passed the report from handphone to handphone.”¹⁰ People here are excited about this news, but without being for or against the ex-official. They tell you how much he “put into his own pocket,” and this is presented as a mistake, and then at some other point they will add that this ex-official built many of the important buildings here. He aided the economy through building. But he took money. The second does not cancel the benefit of the first because there is no easy assumption made to identify whose pockets got picked. It does not seem to be the people who remain neutral about him who were victimized, so perhaps he has stolen from the government or the aid programs. Bireuen is not so much a community as it is an economy. One speaks of the arrested official as one might of a merchant who made a bad investment and went bankrupt. The arrest is interesting, and it might happen to oneself, but it is not exactly one’s own business.

Mustafa was not GAM, and his replacement is. But those who talk about the transition do not suggest that Mustafa is gone because GAM wanted him out. Their conversations suggest instead a suspicion of government based not only on experience of corruption, including the corruption of GAM officials, but also on a recognition that

¹⁰ “Mustafa Ditahan,” *Serambi Indonesia*, December 29, 2007, p. 1.

GAM is not the clear winner in this case, since though GAM won if one thinks of who holds office now, GAM was not victorious in the sense that it installed a new order of government. The government still is something different from the nation or at least from the collectivity which it heads. The problem, indeed, is to know who it is exactly the government governs after one says "those within the borders of the province." What sort of social and political entity do these borders constitute? A nation, and if so, which one—Aceh, Indonesia, *jaméi*?

Which accounts for the strange thinking. On the one hand, everyone is GAM, including young children. It is part of one's nature, one's Acehnese nature (but who is included in the term?). Further, GAM as an organization is divided, and many insist on the existence of a true GAM and a false GAM. The political world is reduced to matters of "development" and corruption. The political ideal is blurred under the name "GAM." When ex-GAM members hold office today, nothing more and nothing less is expected of these ex-GAM ("ex" because of the terms of the settlement with the central government) than of the usual Indonesian officials. These ex-GAM were in prison before as rebels; some are in jail now for corruption. But neither their corruption nor that of other officials, who are not necessarily GAM, is a matter of dishonesty as measured against a civic ideal. The latter is barely discernable under the name "GAM," which in any case will not fully manifest itself until sometime later when Aceh is "*merdeka*," or independent. This word, too, *merdeka*, is a blur without much reference except to the proposition that Aceh's riches will one day fall to "Acehnese."

To make use of one's affinity with GAM, to inflect the developments that take place in its name, one would have to give up the stereotypes, the assertion that "all Acehnese are GAM," that is, the ideal GAM, which we hear invoked frequently. As it is, there is idealism without content. In this regard, Acehnese are scarcely alone. There are even, outside Aceh, some who are nostalgic for Suharto. He, like the *bupati* of Bireuen, was certainly corrupt, but the economy was better when he had control. The collapse of polity and economy into each other, which Suharto effected, now works to obscure his political crimes. People speak of his corruption but seldom of his murders. In Aceh, murders that took place during the "conflict" remain a question of "*dendam*" (vengeance). Everyone is said to have been suspected, and some were killed. Usually people were suspected of informing for one side or the other, rather than of having intolerable political positions. When people say that they were positioned between the two sides, even though their hope was in the GAM, they mean that anyone could be thought to be an informer regardless of his or her political position. And once he was, he was a target. The killer might be from GAM or from the TNI, but what mattered was his name and perhaps his family. Family members would be the targets of further vengeance. *Dendam*, revenge, thus is thought of as a personal matter, distinct from the political identity of the killers to a large extent. Who they were as killers is essential; what side they were on is secondary.

The newspaper *Serambi Pasa* today reports that in Lho' Seumawe, eleven people sentenced to be whipped did not show up for their punishment. They had been convicted in the *syariat* court of *khalwat*, meaning not adultery but "approaching adultery." But the regulations do not permit the people to be brought forcibly to the place of execution of punishment. Only if they resisted arrest initially, or if they did not

show up after being granted a delay in punishment for reasons of health, could this be done.¹¹



Elaborate house outside Bireuen

A few kilometers outside the city there is an enormous house with an onion dome. It has only fourteen rooms, not many for its size, but the master bedroom is seventy-two square meters, and it is not the largest room in the house. It has “oriental” style windows and decoration, a guard post manned by a tough believed to be from the police, along with another man as well, and a fence around it. The house belongs to H. Saifannur. His grandfather was from Yemen. This grandfather married an Acehnese woman and was a religious teacher. H. Saifannur’s father also was a religious teacher. H. Saifannur has a construction company; it builds roads, bridges, dams, and some public buildings. His company is currently erecting an enormous building for the new *kabupaten*. It looks to me like the largest building in Aceh. It will resemble his house, with a Turkish-style dome and so on. He says he has four hundred people working for him, but he started with four in the early 1990s. His firm, he says, is his alone. There are no partners, no joint ventures, no shareholders. That way everything is clear. It will go to his children alone. He has forty engineers working for him, but the decisions are all his. That way what he builds will last; there will be no faulty construction. He is

¹¹ “Kelanjutan Eksekusi Cambuk Mengambang” [Whippings Left Up in the Air], *Serambi Pasa*, December 29, 2007.

skeptical of educated types. What counts is doing it right. It is useless to have knowledge and not use it. One should work hard. He is modernist Muslim in his speech, which is extensive and in which every fifth sentence is a quotation, mainly from the Koran, which he obviously knows well. His opinions, though not his speech, sound like those of Daud Beureueh, the modernist Muslim leader of Aceh from the time of the revolution.

When I asked about the *syariat* police, he said that what was important is that one is right inside and that one works hard. Then everything will work out. He is against the marvelous coffee houses of Aceh. Men waste their time there, and meanwhile their wives go hungry. He speaks with absolute conviction and great energy, punctuating his words with a sharp downward nod of his head and a determined pursing of his lips, as though he were listening to himself and agreeing. It is a religious dialogue he holds with himself in our presence, and it has a religious tonality. He reads "philosophy" in the evenings, and he learns about other religions. He does not care what religion people have—they should be good and work hard. And there should be peace and good leaders, right religion, and a good society. Then everything will be right. Nod, purse.

His discourse is familiar. What distinguishes him is his repeated insistence that whatever he builds should last. Then society will benefit, and he will benefit. His house, then—his palace, in effect—is there for good. It will pass on to his children. What lasts contrasts with what is built corruptly. Corruption, he implies, is not only a political, financial, and moral act; it is an act contrary to the lasting mark one makes by one's own efforts. His firm will continue in his family. He does good for society, and that is his goal. The effect is a future in which his mark and his family will endure. Perhaps it is not accidental that this insistence on lasting quality comes after decades of destruction and that its form is familial, in the end, at least as much as civic. He is not a partisan, he says. He profited during the years of conflict because, he said, he was not on either side. He was a broker, and he was not afraid to speak his mind. He is for the higher good, but he is himself politically neutral. It is the moral society that works and that is profitable. But his house in its feudalistic aspect also suggests a fort.

His house, which cost \$800,000, was built, he said, without an architect. He refused one. It is the product of his "*imaginasi*." The dome is said to be "Turkish," and it vaguely looks it. But it is not, in the first place, a symbol or even an architectural feature with a geographical or cultural reference. It is imaginary, from his own imagination, as though his money had mounted to his head and blossomed there into an onion dome. Another example of the uneasiness about money that we have encountered at every point.

His religious talk went on for about a half hour almost without pause, as though he had a substantial audience rather than a few listeners, all of them strangers (he did not ask about us until the half hour was over). We had a half-hour account of the good he does—he gives people work, he contributes to the development of the *kabupaten*, he provides for his children. As though the money were all used and used properly. Meanwhile, the extravagant house seems to be, first of all, the result of having money and feeling a need to have it express itself. As though a rich person could not be comfortable unless he found his state as a wealthy man acknowledged by society at large. This should mean being acknowledged as contributing to the general good. If, as

he hopes, his mansion is not only a model for the *kabupaten* palace but also the *kabupaten* palace becomes a model for other *kabupaten* buildings, his private architecture will have become the sign of public authority. All will be well.

In the meantime, the house is certainly a landmark and more. It excited those in a coffee shop when we spoke of it. Even though we told them we had seen the house and that we had even photographed it, the men in this shop insisted on repeating detailed directions (it is three kilometers south of the coffee shop, and we did not need much in the way of directions to get there). It is theirs, in a way—theirs to show to us. It has already become the property of the people, an expression of themselves, the voice of the people as it speaks today.

The house as the center—if not the implicit origin—of the world is seen again in two pictures found in Bireuen coffee shops run by Minangkabau:



Minangkabau house with standardized surroundings

The composition of this picture is stereotyped. I have seen several examples of it. There is always a house in the middle, surrounded by water that irrigates rice fields. Though it is a picture meant to hang on a wall, it lacks the idea of the viewer confronting it who sees, then, from a certain point of view. In that respect, too, it differs from naïve painting, which is said to show elements as they strike the eye without the attempt to compose a view. This picture is always centered. The house gathers around itself elements that “naturally” go with it—water, rice fields, often mountains in the background, sometimes emblematic activities such as rice husking, as well, if there are human figures shown. If they are, these are not individuals but examples or symbols of the types that belong to the house. The house in this picture, as in others I have seen, is shut. There are two entrances and two windows, but these do not so much indicate

access to an interior as a single surface. The house is not set in its surroundings; it is out of proportion to them. It is not a habitation, a place of interchange between interior and exterior, but the element that seems to call the river, the road, the rice fields to it. It makes a world cohere. Something like this is perhaps also inherent in the assumptions encircling the real house of H. Saifannur.

In Matang Glumpang Dua, a market fifteen kilometers from Bireuen, several people have been arrested by the *syariat* police and publicly whipped in front of the mosque. According to a man who works in a coffee shop there, they have been guilty mainly of gambling and of illicit sexual relations. They are ashamed (*malu*) to be made a show of in front of everyone. Those whipped include women. They get twenty lashes or more with a rattan stick, or so I was told. They are blindfolded so they cannot recognize who it is that does the whipping.

Ismael said that the *syariat* police are careful about whom they arrest. They are afraid of revenge (*dendam*). One might think that the whippings are sublimated revenge. The revenge that was so feared and so frequently enacted a few years ago, in the age of informers and killings, was supposed to end with the peace treaty and the de facto victory of the GAM, but perhaps this force has been bottled up and taken another form.

The employee of a coffee shop spoke of the whippings with a certain excitement, but it was impossible to say where he stood. Surely for the good, but whether he approved of such force is unclear. What one hears from him is the neutrality that accompanies a lack of investment in the public scene. Certainly he is not for the crime, nor did he seem to take pleasure in telling us of the punishment or seem to feel that the offenders deserved it or that these deviations from the *syariat* had to be wiped out in this way.

Ismael has seen the public whippings twice. He explained to me that those whipped had "transgressed Islamic law" ("*melanggar hukum Islam*"). They were adulterous (he used the word "*khwalat*," which more precisely means, "in danger of committing adultery") or had gambled. This is against Islamic law. The *syariat* court has a stage built in front of the mosque. They invite the *bupati*, religious notables, and others. Anyone is free to watch, and many come. It is "*tontonan gratis*," "a free show," to use the phrase he repeated often. There are men, women, and children in the crowd. The offenders wear a thin garment, like the one used for prayer, usually white but sometimes black. Their hands are tied behind their backs. The person who whips wears a hood so he cannot be identified. No one knows who he is. The court decides. Ismael said it might be the father or a member of the family. But if the offender finds out who he is, he is likely to take revenge. When the whip descends, the crowd cheers. They take pictures. Later little children who witnessed the event will point out the offender—"Itu dia yang ... " "He's the one who ... " The offender is not shunned afterwards. But he feels ashamed inside (*malu kediri sendiri*), I was told. He does not want to look at people. But people do not treat him differently.

But the problem is that only *rakyat kecil*, unimportant people, are ever whipped. There was a case of an official in the *bupati's* office who was caught with his secretary, but they were not punished, and the same was true in Sabang. "*Tidak adil*" ("Its not just").

It is a question of a certain form of entertainment on a stage, not altogether different from other entertainment. The spectators watch. They understand the proceedings. But they are not identified either with the judges or the offenders. They are once again neutral observers. But their neutrality is charged. In the first place, there is inequity when one thinks of who is not punished. But this does not impede the pleasure of looking at a spectacle. It is a play with reverberations—it might be the man's father who whips his son or his daughter. The conflict of kinship and religion is inherent in the scene, judging from Ismael's account. There is no public person charged with executing the punishment, and that is a key. The anonymity of the executioner gives the scene its drama. But the drama is only incipient. There seem to be no cases where *dendam* has taken place, but that is because the secret of the identity of the person who carried out the whipping was kept. And there is no speculation about what a father feels if he whips his child in public. The neutrality of the people most likely to witness these whippings—villagers, or those without much education—is, then, the result of their suppression of just such speculation. What they speak about instead is the shame of the offender, his marginalization, which is caused by the event but perpetuated by his own feelings about himself. The whippings themselves are mere distraction; serious imaginings can thus be dismissed. If these imaginative responses were extended, they might tell the story from the other side. It might be about a love that goes beyond morality. But I never heard this.

"They," those who stage the performance, are considered right, but their rightness is contested by the invocation of another force. If there were no *syariat* police, one feels they would not be missed. The *syariat* could be instituted without them. When they put on their spectacle, it is accepted as that—a "free show," which could have had another form altogether. If they agree with the plot, it is at the cost of suppressing other scenarios—such as the force of a desire that justifies itself, or the conflict within a father who sacrifices his child. This figure, the one who gives himself up to the law, which here means the community, and symbolically kills his child, is not celebrated. He is rather suspected. It might be him who sacrificed his child. And if he did, and it becomes known, the result is conflict once again. This drama, on which the court itself depends, is retold annually on Idhul Adha, in its Koranic form. As in the biblical version, the father's willingness to sacrifice his son presages the establishment of a law above that of the family. But this scenario is at once suggested and refused in the whippings. This unresolved conflict testifies once more to the ambiguities that fissure Acehnese society.

The *syariat* is designed to restructure Acehnese society and to keep order. The terms of its enforcement, however, suggest revenge. When the anonymous executioner is suspected to be the father, the moral, as in the story of Ibrahim and Ismael (Abraham and Isaac in the Judaic and Christian traditions), ought to be that a higher law replaces the conventions, sympathies, and laws of kinship. But the father is masked so that he will be safe from his son. And then the anonymity of the person who executes the whippings is breached by imagination. When the anonymous enforcer is named, a motive can be adduced. And more than a motive, when the enforcer is the father, another law, an earlier one, can be thought to be breached. This is the law that governed all revenge against informers. They betrayed us; they deserve to be killed in turn. Now in imagination there is betrayal once again, and therefore revenge also. The

workings of this earlier law has all the more to be feared and guarded against. Another source of right is at work.

It is curious that when people here speak of the "*konflik*," they speak of informers and of being in the middle between two sides even, as we have seen, when they are, by conviction, for the GAM. They do not talk about the terrible depredations—mostly carried out by the TNI, but also by the GAM—in which whole villages were evacuated; many inhabitants to this day have not been resettled. Nor do they speak of the extortions or rapes or simple murders. To do so would be the beginning of a political view. Instead, it is the view grounded on kinship, the story of revenge, that comes out.

When the law of kinship is invoked, one finds betrayal as a second story underneath the first story of religious crime. This story reflects the interpretation of the recent history of Aceh, told as decades of murderous betrayal. And it also is a refutation of the *syariat*, though not one acted upon. It no doubt also is a protest against the privilege of the rich, who are said to escape the law. But it is not only immunity to the law that is impeached here. It is the right of money to make its own law apart from the *syariat*, while all the time those who enforce the *syariat* preach the latter.

Throughout the archipelago, there have been accusations that others have taken the law into their own hands. These vigilantes are said to be criminals and witch killers, for the most part. Each of them contains the seeds of revolution. In Aceh, the enforcers of the religious law unknowingly incite opposition to themselves.

There are multiple sources of law in Aceh. That is not surprising, given the fissures in Acehnese identity. In this situation, enforcing the *syariat* is an attempt to consolidate identity by making Acehnese subjects of religious law. That it meets resistance of the type we have seen indicates not a revolutionary potential, as I suggested above, but rather the opposite. When all else fails, there is kinship. The time of conflict is over, and, it is hoped, revenge with it. Nonetheless, the law of kinship reasserts itself in the very process of the establishment of the law and brings with it the threat of disorder. It does not have much to do with what it is that the *syariat* interdicts—adultery and gambling. There is nothing in the apparition of the father that suggests that. Rather, his reappearance (in imagination only, of course) is the assertion of a law that, at least, can be depended upon. The attribution of the violence of the conflict to that law, and not to political dispute, shows how the law asserts itself. But the assertion of patriarchy comes via an unstable, imaginative, murderous rivalry between father and son. In the end, no law is found reliable. But there is law. It takes multiple forms, so that when one seems dominant, others appear.

Wherever one turns, one finds nothing much to rely on, as too much asserts itself. And these assertions are not expressions of the interests of different contending groups, but grow out of the attempt to establish a single source of law. The rich man preaches Islam but asserts the power of money. The religious authorities assert the *syariat*, and the law of kinship appears. The law of kinship brings with it bloodshed and thereby calls for other sources of regulation, the state and religion. One sees a fundamental nervousness, by which I mean a mistrust of anything fundamental. But if Aceh offers the strange spectacle of a society that works all the while it reveals its contradictions, one in which skepticism does not hinder the hope of reconstruction, it

is because there is still, for some reason, a belief that there is a—or several—fundamental sources of authority.

Langsa, Sunday, December 30, 2007

The Hotel Firdaus (Hotel Paradise)

This is a new hotel, only two years old, near the market. The eclectic mixture of styles makes the building difficult to place. It is an Islamic hotel, as the name indicates, and it has various emblems, such as a photo of Mecca, in the lobby. The lobby is only



Above: The interior of the Paradise Hotel. Below: Its angels

half finished, or, perhaps better, half used, one large part of it being simply a jumble of old furniture, possible building material, and even rubble. In that sense, one can't tell if one is in a project underway or a semi-ruin. Inside, there are high ceilings, a central staircase leading up three floors, each with a circular balcony onto which the rooms face. The doors are a khaki color, paneled with the top panel having a vaguely Middle Eastern arch. The balustrade is chrome, and in the center of the opening is hung an inflated plastic airplane on one floor, a dolphin of similar material on another. Tiled floors in light green, walls of an orangish red on the bottom, cream on top with brown trim. The impression is "Middle East," antique, Disneyland modern.

There is a sign with multicolored letters—Hotel Firdaus (Hotel Paradise)—and a translucent purple plastic canopy. There is also a large sign at the entrance, announcing that one cannot bring anyone here who is not one's spouse, and one has to show proper identification to get a room. Yet despite these warnings, when I asked to check in, all formalities were put aside, I filled in nothing, and I was told by a young woman in a *jilbab* that we could pay at the time of our departure. It is the sort of confused hospitality that works because architecture here does not sum up the authority of place despite trying. On the one hand, there are the strict regulations of Islam about adultery, as well as the conventions and laws of Indonesia about the registration of guests, especially foreigners. But on the other, there is no enforcement. The lack of enforcement may be due to the confusion of registers (which law?), or it may simply be the effect of smiling hospitality, quite genuine in its village-like quality. In any case, the rules do not work here, but the refusal to exclude anyone, a sentiment probably originally Malay and Javanese and now part of Indonesian culture (though much more so since Suharto has been excluded from politics), makes it unthinkable anyone would misbehave. Or at least they would be ashamed—rather than guilty—to be caught at it.¹²

These towns have a distinctive energy and ways of life. The residents have strong beliefs and are often warm and welcoming. One looks at the conditions of their lives and feels how they have been damaged by the violence of various kinds that they have lived through. But to think that without this violence their lives would be complete is an error. One sees it in the architecture. The Acehnese-style houses that predominated in villages forty years ago (they were almost all there was), at least in certain areas, have not disappeared from villages, but they have been closed in so that a house once built on pillars has become essentially a two-story house. This seems like merely the sort of modification that comes with the addition of electricity and running water. But something like it is true also in the Acehnese towns where Dutch- and Chinese-style buildings have their shapes disguised by new facades. The new architecture is still in the elaborate style of the New Order, the idea seeming to be to make as much of an impression as possible. This ambition is evident in the Hotel Paradise too, where the idea of the old as the authentic gives way to the assumption that there is a moving

¹² I am told by a Frenchman who stayed in a hotel in Meulaboh, however, that he was visited by the *syariat* police accompanied by police brandishing arms. They said they were checking for adultery. When he told them he was old enough to be their grandfather and would not let them in, they politely apologized and left.

present with which one must keep up. Thus, we find Chinese houses next to each other, one standing as it was fifty years ago, the next one with European-style windows and lacking shutters, the third with a cement-block third floor added, but with the original Chinese eaves still intact. Only emblems remain, although they do retain, despite everything, or maybe because of it, a certain aura. This makes the difference between Aceh and other places in Indonesia. In other parts of Indonesia, too, a jumble of styles exist, but one does not feel the pull of their references.

It makes me feel that the sense of foreignness I felt when I began this journal was inherent in the architecture, which mixes anything with anything and is ready to continue doing so. But at the same time, this is not the postmodernism of America, since the references of the emblems to "Chinese" or "Minang" function in the identities of the peoples of this area. Mixture does not ameliorate difference, but difference has only attenuated expressions. One can live here in any setting without the need to identify oneself by one's habitation. The references here are oblique, pointing to something still extant or once extant, but unclaimed. Everyone is received here without the need to fit in or to assert his particular provenance, the condition being the lack of close association and an assumption about the value of commercial activities. The ideal inhabitant here (one cannot say "citizen") might be a foreign polyglot such as Mohammed, the Burmese-Thai-Indonesian married to an Acehnese. For all of Aceh's insistence on Islam, we *kafirs* are not excluded. Less so, certainly, than those unfortunate enough to want each other in a deeper way. We were taken in, I think, as much as anyone, and were for that reason a part of something that almost does not exist.



The *syariat* explained and embodied

Ismael took us to a woman from his *gampong*, on the outskirts of Langsa. She is twenty-three and was a radio announcer before she fell ill with a problem in her throat. She appeared in a white *kerudung* (head covering) and a long pinkish robe covering her body. She told us that the *syariat* Islam is meant to govern all of life, the economy, the rest of life, and not just questions of adultery and gambling. In this sense, the *syariat* Islam in Aceh is incomplete and inadequately understood. For instance, here they use rotan to whip adulterers, but really they should use a whip and not give a mere twenty lashes but continue until the criminals die. Or they should dig a hole and bury a person up to his arm pits. This should be done at a crossroads, and people should stone the guilty person to death. I asked if she had seen a whipping herself. No. Why not? Because she does not want to; she would be *ngeri*, frightened and repelled. She said that people here did not understand the meaning of the punishment. For them it was just "*heboh*," just something exciting. But the *syariat* is meant to protect people. It protects precisely those who are punished. Thus no one is obliged to show up for their punishment. Rather they do so because they are "*insaf*," or aware of their crime already. They want to be punished here so that they will not be punished in the afterlife. But people in Aceh do not understand that. For instance, they know that thieves have their hands cut off, but they don't know that it is not up to the shoulder, at least that is true if what they steal is not worth a lot. If they steal only a coconut, it might be only a finger; then, if they steal more, maybe the hand would be cut at the wrist. If they stole because they were hungry, perhaps no part of their body would be cut off.

She learned all this in formal study, and she repeated it as one might a memorized lesson. It is the authority of the law, but she has neither internalized it nor captured its tone. She is still the schoolgirl turned teacher as she recites for us. But as she does so, she points to her finger, her wrist, her shoulder. This picturing on her own body of the parts to be amputated is without the expression of pain that might accompany such gestures, but nonetheless it leaves a mark there; it is part of the lesson, the way she has taken it on, rather than absorbed it. A little like the way she wears her *kerudung* and her long robe, as though they were foreign attire.

Asked about *khalwat*, she said it meant "*mendekati zina*," to approach being adulterous. Thus people are caught before they commit adultery, and adultery is prevented. So a young couple might be watching television by themselves with no one present. They would be taken to court. The court would warn them and instruct them. What is important is that no one else was present to prevent them from being sexually overcome. That's why Islam insists that a male relative accompany a woman wherever she might go, but people here do not yet accept this practice. Thus the couple watching television might have innocent intentions, but they would be arrested anyway, "that's how much Islam hates adultery." It is not suspected motives even that are punished. People are not punished for their desires or their imaginings, she implies. It is, rather, the imposition of a template of behavior placed over actions and determining what they mean with no reference to subjectivity at all. This is the familiar working of the Islamic law. But here we see it as a form of enlightenment, as this woman thereby makes of herself a member of the community better placed to understand than most others.

She went on to say that the *syariat* protects people, since others would know they—this hypothetical young couple—were alone, and as a result they would talk. The couple would thus be the object of *fitnah*, of scandalous rumor. The implementation of the *syariat* protects them and stops the community from circulating untruths. One concludes that the law thus guarantees the truth of discourse.

She has studied with local teachers. She spoke of her dress. Other women might wear the *kerudung*, but then wear jeans or even a skirt, but she covers her shame (*aurat*) entirely. The completeness of the covering of her body, which people wonder at, thinking she is a member of a *tarekat*, perhaps, is an admission of the strength of her shame. She is talked about, but there is no *fitnah*. She is protected from untruths at the price of a display of her shame, which her dress announces.

She said also that the *syariat* police, who are usually between twenty-five and forty-five years old, but mainly in their thirties, are incompletely trained. It happens that they use their office to arrest those they are unhappy with. (Ismael told us that the police are forbidden to arrest anyone from their own *gampong*.) And the court is also imperfect. Sometimes the judges let someone go. They don't really understand. Then people (*masyarakat*) are angry, and the court loses its authority. Without punishment, the *syariat* could never be really implemented.

Her view is a minority one. She said people like herself could be counted on the fingers of one hand. But the rules regarding dress are implemented. In Langsa, generally, women wear the *jilbab*. I do not think they are really oppressed by this. The *jilbab* resembles the scarf that Acehnese women wore traditionally. And wearing the *jilbab* did not stop girls from wearing tight jeans. But this now has become an issue. The papers reported girls from a mall being brought to hear a woman lecture them on proper dress. The dress code, as well as, for the most part, the anti-adultery measures, are anti-youth, anti-girls in particular. Young girls are an uncontrollable element. This woman accepts that about herself and so dresses accordingly. She wore the *kerudung* when she was very young, so that is not new. But, she told us, she was suddenly *insaf*, aware, and sought guidance ("*mau dibimbing*"), she said, using New Order terminology.

There is nothing here of the freedom from the male gaze that some proponents of the veil assert. As they explain it, wearing the veil makes possible the appropriation of the male position by the female. Here, the male gaze is present in the form of the community itself, and she remains its object rather than someone who has taken on its power for herself.¹³ Were it otherwise she would not have avoided witnessing the beatings. As it is she does not go to see them because she is afraid. There is a distorted identification with the victim in this and much else that she says. She is talked about, and she would be talked about wrongly if she did not wear the dress she wears. Either way, in her view she is at the heart of communal attention so pervasive that drives it her to extreme measures.

It is not, in my opinion, that she narcissistically puts herself at the center of attention, but that she asserts an active and cohesive community, presently imperfect but with determination rectifiable, that actually exists. She knows it in her own body as

¹³ Anne Berger, "The Newly Veiled Woman: Irrigaray, Specularity, and the Islamic Veil," *Diacritics* 28,1 (Spring, 1998): 93-119.

she covers and thus imaginatively displays it. The indication of this is her tonality. Her hopes for Aceh are ferocious, as though there is some evil to be extirpated, and no measure can be ruled out in doing so. But she speaks softly. At first with the voice of the Indonesian teacher whose patience takes into account the ignorance of her audience. As she goes on, the didactic recedes and is replaced with a certain animation. One might say that she lights up. She shows herself and she is seen, not by us who remain the ignorant ones we were before, but by the community she feels built around her. She is at the center only in the sense that her thinking begins with herself. Nonetheless she finds it reassuring that the content of her thinking comes from elsewhere. She has learned what she tells us, it has an impeccable source, it comes from religion but via the community. A community already in place, even if it is yet to be implemented.

This is one face of Aceh's recent past. It is not that Aceh is being reconstructed after its disasters, but that its existence itself is reasserted. The state turning against Aceh, pillaging, raping, and murdering, has so badly damaged nationalism that a new form has become apparent in the coastal towns. (No doubt the villages are different.) An earlier structure has reasserted itself—the plural society, the coastal Malay mosaic, never eliminated despite the penetration of the Indonesian state and culture. In this way, Acehnese cosmopolitanism has survived two invasions. Now the conflict is over, the tsunami has passed, and the foreign agencies involved in reconstruction have mostly departed. The time when so many of the inhabitants of the province found themselves between sides, the victim or the potential victim of both, is gone. The tsunami remains strongly in memory, the frequent earthquakes sometimes causing panic. But Acehnese society, at least in the coastal towns, is in place. No one is excluded. The very possibility of welcoming anyone, however, is different than it was before. Earlier, it was understood that there was an authority beyond the local even when that authority seldom made itself felt. This was an unselfconscious belief. Now authority cannot be taken for granted any longer. Members of the GAM are in power, but not the true GAM. There is a sense of incompleteness. It makes one woman think that it is not enough that so many offices are held by former GAM members. Only when Aceh is independent would Aceh be what it should be.

Something needs regulation, but it is no longer the invader, and it is not the stranger. After everyone is assimilated, when the possibility of accepting strangers goes on without damage, despite calamities, there is an undefined element that causes uneasiness. It is not others; perhaps it is Acehnese themselves, in the form of their children and particularly their daughters. Perhaps it is something else.

This is one conclusion, but another suggests itself. As we have said, wherever one goes in Aceh, someone is likely to point out a place where a body or bodies were found. Neither the corpses nor the killers are identified. One can distinguish nothing in the landscape that marks these places. The most banal spots now mean these deaths. Aceh has become the unhallowed burial ground of persons never identified. They stand for the others still living, who were potential victims of both sides. Anyone could have become an OTK, an "unknown person," could have reverted to an anonymity that they had never suspected was possible. The very openness of Acehnese society made that so unlikely the possibility did not come to mind before the era of conflict

and natural disaster. But it seems to me, at least, that now people recognize this possibility.

The contrast is with the mass graves of tsunami victims. The ones we visited were on the outskirts of towns, no doubt because that was where space was available. At the same time, the tsunami was credited with bringing the conflict to an end by its refusal to discriminate in its choice of victims. No one knows who the mass graves contain, but the victims are not anonymous. The people who visit them think of them as the sites of their lost relatives. With massive numbers of victims, particularly children, the act of only ambiguously separating the dead from the living enables the living to continue. Victims are retrieved from anonymity, but, to the degree to which they are set off from the living, they, particularly dead children, mark a dead end, the lack of a future.

This is not the first time Acehnese society has faced death on a scale that threatened the whole of society. The jihad of the Dutch-Acehnse war—Acehnese leaving the world behind—was extensive and so radical in its implications that Aceh could continue only by turning its back on the jihad rather than celebrating the heroism of martyrs. What followed was the modernist Islam that deemphasized such action and concentrated on remaking the actual world. The confounding of the *konflik* and the tsunami, making them one catastrophe that generated huge numbers of deaths, brings eschatological questions to mind, but the reaction is not in tune with the idea of an end. Aceh today is nervous, but this nervousness is not consolidated in religious reactions.



The bay at Tapak Tuan

Indonesia since the fall of Suharto in 1998 is a much more relaxed place. In its cities outside of Aceh, one sees people going about their business. The fear that so marked the New Order has not entirely passed, but it has been greatly ameliorated. One does not have the same sense in Aceh today, in December, 2007. The anonymous victims, "ourselves," are, in the woman above, gathered into her own determination to be "the" victim, the one who proves that Aceh has been or will be reconstituted. She is almost singular by her own account (that confession is not innocent). But whatever ways others elect to live through this particular moment, they seldom (one cannot say "never") turn consciously to vengeance. One does not hear the name "Suharto," for instance. As during the period of the close of the colonial war, it is not by building on the past or even against the past but in other ways that Aceh seems to be reshaping itself today.

The implementation of the *syariah* is a way of trying to make Aceh work. It is only obliquely a political program. It was a bargaining point offered by Jakarta to the GAM rather than being a central demand of Acehnese. In a certain way, it has always been in effect in Aceh, albeit symbolically. The use of the police to enforce the *syariah* today is new and controversial, and this has made it easy for people to imagine taking the place of the victim, the punishable subject of the law. It is not the position of most Acehnese. Other Acehnese we met remain undefeated. But they are not victors. Beginning with this indefinite status, the people of Aceh find the terms of their future.

APPENDIX: PUBLICLY DISPLAYED SIGNS

Acehnese cities are draped in banners, billboards, and more permanent signs speaking from various sources about a multitudes of topics, but almost all of them in the mode of advocating civic improvement ... if only readers will follow the advice. We list a selection of these, categorized by city. In many cases, the name of the organization that posted a particular message is noted in parentheses.

Banda Aceh

Tsunami is not a Judgment but a Warning [*Telkomsel*]

The Era of the Conflict is Over
Peace, Reconciliation, and Prosperity are the Era of the Future
[See photograph of this banner above]

Independent [in English] Aceh.
The moment THEY use the word, WE supply the meaning behind the facts and events.

This message was unsigned but is known to have been put up by the army. See photograph of this banner above.

Let's Build an Aceh that is Reconciled and Prosperous
Leave the Past, Filled with Wounds and Tears, Behind
(Kelembaan Komunikasi dan Informasi) (Satker Pen)

This last message was posted on a very large billboard with a veritable montage of photos. It moves from left (showing the past, with crying children) to the right (with happy children). (Also found in Meulaboh and Sigli with variations.)

The Government of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam
Commemorates 3 Years
The Human Tragedy [*Tragedi*]
Earthquake and Tsunami
26 December 2004

This message appeared with photographs layered around a blank map of Aceh. There is a bullseye over what seems to be an aerial view of Banda Aceh, and pictures of devastation and ruins. See photograph of this billboard above.

Whosoever Wins and is Chosen is the Channel of Your Aspirations
Pilkada, 11 December 2007

Value peace, honesty, justice without force
(Satker BRR Penguatan Kelembagaan Kominfo)

Keep Our City Clean
It is Forbidden to Deposit Garbage
Along This Street/In this Area
Under Threat of Law (Qanun) of the City of Banda Aceh
No. 5, 2005

This Message is Conveyed through the Cooperation of World Vision Indonesia,
the DKP, City of Banda Aceh

The sign above appeared with the World Vision logo on top.



Multi Donor Fund
Carelessly Throwing Garbage/ Cigarette Butts on these Streets/Territories Will Be
Punished by Fines and/or Jail
(Qanun No. 5/2003)
City of Banda Aceh

The sign above shows the logo of UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) in one corner, and the tricolor and British flags in another.

DATA IS EXPENSIVE
To Build Without Data Is
Work Wasted.
For that Reason Help Statistics Officials
By Giving
The Right Data
(Infokom Prov. NDA BPS Prov NAS)

Truly
Believers
Are BROTHERS [*bersaudara*]
For that Reason,
Reconcile
Your Two Brothers
(Pemko, Banda Aceh)

Truly
People who Sin
Do Not Profit
(Pemko Banda Aceh)

Commemorate 3 Years Tsunami
With Prayers and True Works
(Partai Golkar Provinsi NAD)

Law Number 8, 1999
Concerning the Protection of Consumers
Think and be Prudent
Before Buying
Be a Wise and Careful Consumer
(Sumber Disperindag Prov NAD)

This message was accompanied by a picture of three women in *jilbab* in a supermarket.

Economize on Lighting, Economize on Paying
Pay your Electric Bill Quickly
Thank you (PT PLN)

Narcotics have bad effects
On health and functioning
Of body organs
Stop Narcotics
Or Die for Nothing

Meulaboh

Education of Children is More Important than Making Them Earn Money
Don't Use Children as a Way to Make a Living

The first line of the message above was written in Acehnese, the second in Indonesian.

A Safe Aceh is an Aceh without Illegal Weapons

Langsa

For the Building of Democracy, Not for Destruction (KPU Langsa)

This message was accompanied by a picture of a wild-looking man with an axe. On the left, there was a frightened child. On the right, a boy wearing a tie and carrying a schoolbook.

Life is More Beautiful without Narcotics
(Badan Narkoba Kota Langsa)

This message was accompanied by pictures of various narcotics, anguished victims, etc.

There is no need to be Bewildered
Let true conviction [*nurani*] speak (Kota Langsa)

With this message, there was a cartoon of a man taken aback by a crowd of men carrying signs saying, "Party of the Mad," "Party of Strength," "Party of Money," "Top Party," "Sensational Party," "Exciting Party."

Let Us Unite
Build Aceh
That is Better, Prosperous, and of Value

With these message were large photos of three officials shown against a background of the Mesjid Raya, the great mosque in Medan, along with pictures below them of popular types—a *becak* driver, etc.

In Peace we can Work
With Work
We can Build Aceh
To be a country of reconciliation, peace, and tranquility
Just and Democratic
(Sakter Penguatan Kelembaan Komunikasi dan Informasi)

This sign showed the logo of the government of Aceh and photos of youth and children working.

Singkel

Don't Stain Reconciliation for Self Interest or Group Interest (NAD Singkil)

Let's Follow Through on the Obligation of 9 Years of Education
Has your Child Left School?
School him Through Various Programs Available from the Government
Get in Touch with the Local Education Service

Use a Helmet For Your Safety (Polres Aceh Singkil)

This sign included pictures of various police, one of them fastening a helmet on a male youth.

Increase the Participation of Society in Efforts to Raise Health Services For the
Good of Singkil Society

Lho' Seumawe



According to Law 23, 2002
"Protection of Children"
Every Child
Has the Right to Be
Protected From
Discrimination
Exploitation [*eksploitasi*]
Neglect
Cruelty
Force
Torture
Injustice

(Bagian Pemberdayaan Perempuan Sekretariat Daerah Kota Lhokseumawe)

This message was illustrated by a picture of two bare-chested men behind bars and a teenage girl in a *jilbab*, carrying a school sack, passing by. Their eyes do not meet. Two different worlds.



Every Person who Engages in Domestic Violence
According to Law 23, 2004
Concerning the Wiping Out of Force in
The Household (KDRT) Breaks the Law
Of Human Rights and Can Have
Criminal Proceedings Brought [with jail penalties]
(Bagain Pemberdayaan Perempuan Sekretariat daerah kota Lho' Seumawe)

This billboard followed a convention of the use of images, namely a sequence visualizing behavior that otherwise would be abstract.



Law (Qanun No. 11/2002 Paragraph 13 Sentence [ayat] 1)
Every Muslim is Obligated to Wear Islamic Dress
Those who Break the Law will be Punished by the Islamic Courts

This warning was accompanied by a double picture, showing two sets of youth. One group was made up of girls in tight jeans, wearing no *jilbab*, a boy in shorts and a sleeveless t-shirt, the boy and girls together. A large red cross appears over each girl's crotch. The other picture shows boys in long-sleeved shirts, with books in hand, and girls in *kurung* and long robes.

Bireuen

Have an IMB (Idzin Membangun, or zoning permit)
 With an IMB
 Building will be orderly
 The environment will be protected

This message appeared next to the new government building under construction and on the site of the proposed Murni Plaza.

These messages to the populous contrasted, by their number as well as their content, with signs and billboards typically seen in places like Medan, where they would be many fewer in number and, except for election campaign exhortations, not likely to be political. Banners were popular during the New Order and before, when the problem was that the population needed to be *dibimbing*, led or guided. The reappearance of these public exhortations not merely after the tsunami, but after the "reconciliation" ("*damai*"), a word that occurs often in these messages, points to the politicized condition of Aceh at the moment. One must instantly add that the terms of this politicization are not based on any tension between two opposed positions, but concern the establishment of authority itself.

The problem can be seen in the word "*damai*," "making peace." There are two sides that have been reconciled. Neither side is the victor or the loser. On the one hand, Aceh is now again indisputably part of Indonesia, but there is a fear that somehow the move for independence will revive. Certainly it is the wish of many people. On the other hand, the GAM won most of the important offices in the election. The leadership of the independence movement is thus in power, but that power stems from the national government. These signs concerning everything from shopping to littering indicate how shaky authority feels itself to be. And, for that matter, how its source is at least potentially multiple. What other assumption can there be when the telephone company speaks about the meaning of the tsunami and a political party does the same?

Finally, we can approach the problem of authority by taking into account the sign pictured below:



I am Ashamed If
I throw Garbage Anywhere I Please
(Multi Donor Fund, with UNDP logo)
(Prosyek TRWMP Dispenda Kab. Pidie)

The remnants of the tsunami—the *sampah* or debris or garbage it left—need to be controlled and, moreover, they are by implication inherent in the inhabitants of Aceh themselves. To control garbage is thus a large issue. It is not surprising that a campaign against *sampah* has been waged since the tsunami and that it is waged not only by the government, but also by multinational agencies.